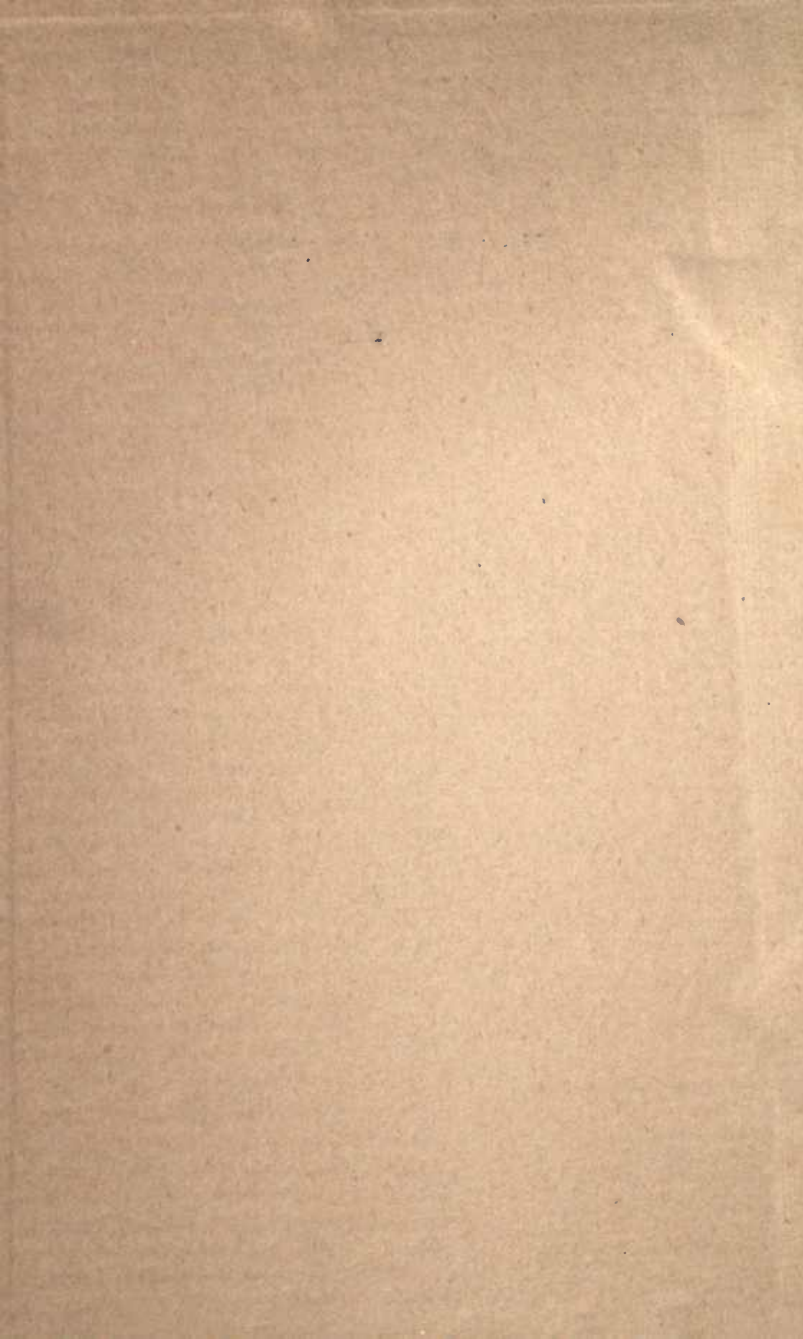


THE HOUND
OF CULLAN

F. A. M. WEBSTER



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State Street 10
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THE HOUND OF CULLAN

BY

F. A. M. WEBSTER

AUTHOR OF "BRITAIN IN ARMS,"

"EVOLUTION OF THE OLYMPIC GAMES,"

&c.

LONDON

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1918

THE
HOUSE OF COMMONS

MEMORIAL
PRESENTED TO
THE HOUSE OF COMMONS
IN THE YEAR 1861

TO
MY CHILDREN
DICK AND JOAN
THIS ROMANCE
OF OLD IRELAND
IS
LOVINGLY DEDICATED

2057817

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THE HOUND OF CULLAN

A TALE OF THE ULTONIAN CYCLE

CHAPTER I

ABOUT the time of the coming of Christ there dwelt in Ireland at the Court of Connor Mac Nessa, King of Ulster, a little lad named Setanta, born to fame of Cathbad's daughter Dectera. Of him it was prophesied by the Druid Morann that "His fame should be in the mouths of all men; charioteers and warriors, Kings and sages should tell his deeds; and he should win the love of many; the child should avenge the wrongs of his people, guard the fords, and decide all quarrels."

Early in his childhood Setanta began to surpass all his companions, sons of chieftains and princes, in the manly and warlike games in which the noble children of the heroic age were trained.

Barely had he reached the age of eleven years when one day whilst engaged in a game of hurley in the courtyard of the Castle, his prowess was noticed by the King, who with all his retinue of nobles was passing upon his way to visit Cullan the Smith, at his forge near Quelgny. Drawing rein, the Monarch watched the children, and, turning to his nobles, "I' faith," quoth he, "he is a

noble lad, and worthy to carry on the traditions of our Ancient Race." Turning to the boy he said:

"Setanta, quit thy play and come with us this day to visit Cullan!"

The boy, however, was unwilling to leave the game unfinished, and so replied, "Indeed, I will, my Lord, but I crave thy gracious leave to finish first the game; which done, I follow swiftly in thy wake to join the joyous band at Quelgny."

Smilingly the glittering cavalcade moved on, leaving the children at their play, and Setanta to follow later, at his will.

Arrived at the dūn of Cullan, the King and his courtiers entered joyously upon the feast prepared for them, and with many a merry jest and well-sung stave the time was passed.

At evenfall the fortress gates were barred and the great hound of Cullan loosed to guard his master's dwelling from swift surprise; but, in the pleasure of the feast, the coming of Setanta was forgotten.

Now legend relates that so stark and strong was the hound of Cullan that no ten men armed with spears and bucklers dared face him in his rage. What chance, then, could there be for the little lad, at that same moment tramping gaily over the hills, cheering his heart upon his lonely way with the lilt of a song as he strode onward to obey the King's command to join him at Quelgny?

Within the fortress, all was light and merriment. At the high table, raised on two steps and set crosswise at the top of the hall, sat Cullan, the Smith; at his right hand King Connor, upon his left, Fergus, the King's champion, and again on either side of them all the great nobles of Ulster. At the lower table, which ran the length of the hall, rested the King's free companions and the household retainers of Cullan.

Swords were laid aside and belts loosened to the repast, the drinking horns passed freely round the board from hand to hand; right sweetly sang the skalds of many a doughty deed of the heroes aforetime, and

lustily did the soldiers roar the marching chorus of the war songs as cup followed cup, until the King's Cup at last was poured. And then the Smith and all that company stood up to toast their lord; but hark! What is that sound of terror and affright, shattering the silence that has fallen, as Cullan lifts high the horn to pledge the King? Shouts of warfare, the ringing of steel against stone, the humming of the hard flung javelin, and, above all, the ghastly snarling of the hound are heard without the walls.

"By the Red Branch, we are attacked! To arms, my men! To arms!" shouts Cullan.

"Aye! to arms," growls the King, "and out upon these rascals who disturb our feast. The shedding of their blood shall but sweeten the cup when we return to this festive board."

Hastily the warriors gird themselves, and snatch up javelin, sword and buckler, and race down the hall to be first at the great door of the fortress to repel the attackers.

Wide swings the gate, out rush the King and Cullan at the head of armed men, and then all pause, amazed at the scene which astounds their very reason; for the hound of Cullan lies dead and bloody, one side of his head smashed to pulp; for his brains have been beaten out against the doorpost, and there, with heaving chest and flashing eyes, stands Setanta, with one foot upon the monster's carcase, for he it is who has wrought this mighty deed.

Amazed stand all men, until Fergus speaks: "Behold, my liege, a royal son of a royal race obeys his King's command in face of mighty odds, for methinks, never did stripling or grown man accomplish such a deed before in Erin. Skalds shall sing of this hero-act while time shall run and Ulster own a King. Truly the Red Branch bears beauteous blossom to grow to noble fruit."

Proudly smiles the King and loud roar the rollicking warriors as he embraces the brave boy.

"My son! this day thou hast done mightily, and time

shall prove thee Ireland's greatest champion, long before the hair upon thy face grows thick."

"My noble Sire! I did but battle with the beast that I might join thee as thou did'st command, and not to prove the manhood that springs upward in my heart."

All, however, is not joy, for there apart stands Cullan, with tear-dimmed eye and great bitterness in his heart, looking down upon the faithful friend of many years, whom he has trained from puppyhood to be his companion in the chase and to guard the fortress while he slept. Bitterly Cullan mourns the dog he has reared and loved so well; alone of all that company who are his guests, Setanta sees his grief and is smitten with remorse, that, even to save his own life, he has brought sorrow to his liege-lord's friend and host.

"Cullan," said he, "if I have wrought thee wrong, I grieve for it, and did that which I did only in self-defence, and that I might keep the life whole within me; the hound is dead, and no sorrow of mine will give him life again, but if I could fill his post that would I do right willingly, and, indeed, why should I not? 'Tis I have wrought the wrong, 'tis I must make amends; yet how may this be? Say, Cullan, how may I serve thee in thy need? For well thou shalt believe, ere all this tale be told, that Setanta ever pays the debt he owes!"

Slowly the black, rage-born blood welled from the battered head of the new slain hound and slowly down dropt the bitter tears of Cullan, but no man spake, till out from the fortress gate gambolled a little puppy, full of play, until its roving gaze fell on its stiffening sire, whereon it ran to him and, nestling 'gainst his shaggy pelt, set up a piteous whining.

"See, Cullan, and you my liege, and noble lords of Ulster," crys Setanta, "the very gods themselves point out the way to the accomplishment of my desires; give me the whelp, oh Smith! and I will train him, aye! and guard thy dūn myself night after night until he be a hound full grown, crafty in the chase, fierce in defence

of thee and thine, and faithful to thee by thy bed and board. Till then I am thy servant and thy guard."

Cullan now steps forward and embraces the generous lad and thanks him for his pledge; Setanta is swung up shoulder high by brawny arms, placed on a seat of spear shafts resting on the shoulders of the warriors, and thus, to the measure of a marching song, they carry him in under the gate and up the hall, right up to the high seat, and there they seat him at the right hand of the King; the interrupted feast proceeds, the King's Cup is drunk, and then up rises Fergus, champion of the King, and, lifting high his drinking horn, thus speaks:

"Setanta! This day hast thou wrought a mighty deed, of which I, the King's champion, might well be proud to boast; by thy stark might thou hast overcome the Smith's terrific hound, against whom no ten champions have 'ere this dared to stand; not by craft in arms was the deed accomplished, nor by stealth with the well-flung javelin from a safe hiding place, but bravely with thy naked hands hast thou done battle for thy life and honour. Cullan, I know, forgives thee his dead hound, the impulse of his heart and thy most worthy vow to guard his dūn urging him thereto; wherefore be thou known in future, not as Setanta but as Cuchulain,* Hound of Cullan, in memory of this day! The Druid Morann prophesied at thy birth that thou shouldst do mighty deeds, and now, I too, must have my say, for to-night a strangeness comes o'er me, and I think that I am fey—or, perchance, 'tis but death that awaits me—and I see clearly into the future, as do the foredoomed, whom the Morrigan has marked to go to her on the wave of battle frenzy. This I say of thee, and mind thou mark'st it well! Through mighty deeds shalt thou win the guerdon of a beauteous woman's love, and she shall cleave to thee as long as life and time do last. A friend shall thy valour bring thee such as few may count upon to guard their backs in the battle; a Goddess and a Queen shall love thee, but their love thou shalt reject; yet wilt

* Pronounced "Koo'hoo'lin."

thou prove faithless to thy love 'ere all this tale be told. A head without a body shall speak of thy deeds and raise the countryside to thy aid; the hero-light shall shine about thy head; but guard against the battle frenzy, for if thou dost not, in it, thou shalt surely slay both son and friend, and this in very truth I think will come to pass. Yet at the last, I know, a glorious death awaits thee, for thou shalt die in thy standing with many dead around thee, a fitting bed on which to lie at long last; thy faithful steed, a gray, shall be with thee to the end and shall bring an avenger on the trail of thy slayers, thy body shall rest by water, stone and earth, but thy head and hand travel fast to Tara. I have finished—Cuchulain—guard thee well!"

As the evening wore away, all men became drunken, but Cuchulain would touch no cup, remembering his pledge to Cullan, and presently, when one by one the nobles at the upper table had gone to the guest chambers to sleep off the effects of the orgy, and the warriors lolled at the tables in all sorts of grotesque attitudes, or reclined upon the rush-strewn floor, he got up from the high table, where he sat alone, and taking spear and buckler from among the trophies on the wall, strode quietly forth to take his lonely vigil without the fortress walls. Hours passed till the cool dawn wind came stealing softly o'er the hills lifting the raven locks falling to his shoulders from beneath the fillet bound about his brow; there he stood in all the grace of his unsullied youth, a sweet promise of beauteous manhood, leaning on his spear, musing on the strange happenings of the previous day and the still stranger words of Fergus at the banquet of yesternight, thinking doubtless that his feet were now firmly planted on the ladder of life and resolving to use his life to the best purpose, and to do many mighty deeds.

Meanwhile the primrose fingers of the dawn shoot one by one across the sky, heralding the coming of the life-giving sun, till presently the edges of banks of clouds are tinged with silver, then with gold, and the sun in all his glory bursts into view, as Lugh drives out his car once more from East to West in his accustomed round; then,

as one by one, the revellers of last night come out to wash away the signs of their late carouse, they find Cuchulain, true to his oath, still on guard.

After a hasty meal King Connor Mac Nessa calls together his followers and departs, leaving Cuchulain to train up the puppy and fulfil his oath to the Smith.

As time goes on Cullan grows to love the lad, and would fain lighten his self-imposed task, but Cuchulain is obdurate; he will not hear of a guard of soldiers taking his place, or even sharing his vigil; no! he has killed the guardian of the dūn, and he alone will take his place.

Naturally the story of his deed and his subsequent vow to take the hound's place until the hound's whelp shall be trained and grown spreads far and wide, until in time it comes to the ears of some marauders who have long desired to possess themselves of the wealth the Smith has accumulated through many years of strenuous toil. Thinking that a half-grown lad can be but a poor protection for the fortress, they determine to attack it in the darkest hour before the dawn, when all life is at its lowest ebb and the vigilance of the guardian is most likely to be relaxed.

One night, therefore, as Cuchulain leans upon his spear brooding on the years to come, he is rudely roused from his meditations by a javelin whizzing past his head to stand quivering in the lintel of the door behind him. Instantly he stands upon the defensive, with spear arm flung back and buckler 'crost his breast awaiting what may befall.

Moment after moment he waits, reasoning that it is but some escaped serf or wandering marauder who has attacked him for the sake of his arms; at last he steps beyond the earthwork to seek his foe. Immediately he is greeted by a hail of javelins and sling stones; some whizz harmlessly by, others he catches on his buckler, but one just grazes his thigh, drawing blood as it flies.

"To me! men of Cullan," he shouts, as he stands upon the earthwork with throwing arm stretched back, watching his chance to fling a javelin if a lurking foeman shews himself.

Stealthily the evil, bearded face of a one-eyed man peers out over the brow of a little hillock, instantly the javelin speeds on its errand of death from the hand of Cuchulain and—the robber will go to the foray no more, for his soul is rent from his body as his hands grope starkly at the spear point quivering in his throat; meanwhile his life's breath whistles from the wound; gaily the thrower laughs, shaking his other javelin and jeering the foeman to meet him face to face.

He listens, but still no sound is heard within the dūn.

And now the foemen sweep forward, grimly silent, the waning moonlight glittering wanly on spear point and upraised sword.

Again he shouts! "Awake, ye men of Cullan! thy foes are upon thee." And to himself he mutters: "Not long may I hold the earthwork in face of such odds," for full twenty well-armed men rush on him, yet firm he stands while they surge around like wind-driven waves breaking on a rocky shore.

Swiftly he flings his second javelin, and so mighty is the throw that two men take their death of it; Cuchulain catches a spear as it flies, instantly flinging it back, to be the bane of the foremost attacker, but now they are come at him and he must take to sword and buckler to preserve his life. Still they cannot come at his back as yet, but press him hard in front.

The good sword is up, sweeping a ring around him within which it is death to step. One cuts downwards at his head, shearing away half the shield, which is advanced to meet the stroke, and wounding Cuchulain in the shoulder. Another, louting low, sweeps at his legs, but the youth leaps high o'er the circling blade and, striking downward as he springs, cleaves the swordsman to the chin. For a second he cannot wrench free the sword, and so is practically unarmed. Seeing this, another foeman dashes forward, only to receive the point of the buckler full between the eyes and to fall back gory and howling.

Up rush the leader and two of his fighting tail, furious at their ill success; swiftly he outstrips his henchman,

but meets his fate by the sword, which knows no niceties of play, only striking cleanly down through bone and muscle. The other two draw off while all men stand amazed at the stark might of this mere stripling.

Cuchulain laughs aloud, tossing his sword high in air and catching it by the grip as it falls, the echoes of his laughter ring weirdly around the walls of the dūn.

"What! Are there no three of ye who will come up to take a young boy's head to tie to his chariot wheels? Must I come at ye then, ye laggards?"

Then two men spring forward with axe and spear upraised, but the good sword hums again in Cuchulain's hand and their knees are loosened in death.

By now the sounds of strife and the shouts of the combatants have aroused the sleepers, and men are hastily arming within the dūn; yet Cuchulain must keep back the foe until the gate is unbarred and the plank thrown across the ditch to let the defenders out.

Frantically the marauders strive to take the earthwork before the defenders can be out and man it, for now can be heard distinctly the rattle of chains as the bolts are shot back; the gate swings open and out pour the inmates, while Cuchulain, flinging his buckler in the face of those who press upon him, dashes forward with an awe-inspiring yell, followed by the defenders, whose blood is thoroughly up as they race forward, clamouring and leaping in his wake.

Compassionately the moon sinks to rest behind the hill veiling from her sight the scenes of butchery which follow, for now the swords drink deep of the red blood of those who have dared to attack the dūn of Cullan, until all are slain save one slim youth who flies across the plain on fear-lightened feet to save his life, but what chance has he of outdistancing the fleetest runner in all the Emerald Isle? Rapidly Cuchulain overhauls him, until he is within striking distance and the sword is upraised to check the runner's flight. Even now the blade sweeps down, when a voice seems to speak to him from out the sky, "My son, spare thou this youth to serve thee." The blow may not be checked, but the sword is turned

aside and Cuchulain grasps the fugitive by the hair. "Young man, I have thee! Stand now and let us talk awhile. Thou seemst over young to consort with robbers and men of evil repute. How sayest thou, and how art thou named?"

"Lord!" answered the young man, "I am called Laeg, and since infancy have I been reared by the robbers, whose chief Beälcu found me in a castle which he sacked 'ere yet I was a year old; my soul has ever revolted from the robber's trade, and if thou wilt have me I will be thy man and serve thee well and truly all my days. No great warrior am I, but, among horses, as a charioteer, few can surpass me."

"Such talk is very well," said Cuchulain, "but how do I know, Laeg, if I take thee as my henchman, that thou, who art robber reared, wilt not murder me one night in my sleep?"

"Lord," said Laeg, "surely I see blood welling up from thy left shoulder; stretch forth thine arm then, that I may touch it with my lips and the oath of brother-in-blood be sworn between we two, for to thou wilt I cleave, for thou art surely the mightiest of men, who hast this day slain Beälcu, against whom in his wrath no three men have ere this been found to stand."

So the oath of brother-in-blood was sworn, and Cuchulain enlisted the first of his fighting tail, which in after years was to be famous the world over, from Ireland to far Cathay.

These two returned to the gate of the dūn, where the warriors were resting after the slaying, but when they saw Laeg full twenty swords flew clear to 'spill' the blood of the captive.

But, "Put up your swords," quoth Cuchulain, his own sword swinging free in his hand while with his own body he sheltered Laeg from the angry warriors. "An hour since ye had struck at an outlawed robber, but now 'tis mine own henchman, and who wars with him counts me his foe."

CHAPTER II

A YEAR passed away.

Cuchulain and Laeg were inseparable, the latter watching his master with the mute affection of a well-loved hound and instructing him in all the wiles of horsemastership and horsemanship so well known to your true Irishman.

Day by day Cuchulain grew in strength and beauty, and now, under his skilful tuition, the whelp of the hound of Cullan began to get his girth and to wax nearly as fierce as his sire, so that the period of the hero's vow was almost run.

One day Cuchulain sought out Cullan and asked if the Smith were satisfied that the hound was fully trained and fit to be his guard.

To him Cullan replied: "My noble boy, knowst thou not that I would long since have released thee hadst thou wished, but now thou art free to go. Yet I have grown to love thee well, and, Cuchulain, I am a childless man, wilt thou not stay with me and be my son? When the Morrigan calls for me I must go hence on that long journey from which none may return, although many old friends await me in the shades. Then thou shalt have this dūn and all my hard-earned wealth shall be thine, but if thou wilt not stay—and I feel that the time of parting draws nigh for we two—then go hence, not an undowered stripling, but as a man well equipped for war in goods and arms."

Sadly then Cuchulain answered him.

"Cullan, well hast thou treated me, and great is the love I bear thee, yet this may not be, for all my deeds are yet to do; dost thou not remember the words of Fergus and the prophecy of the Druid Morann, how my name shall be in all men's mouths, my deeds spoken of by warriors and charioteers? How may this be if I stay here at the dūn of Quelgny? Give me then my faring

forth and this I swear, if in thy need thou callest on me, then surely will I come. Moreover, Cullan, remember it is said that I am the son of Sualtam, but full well I know myself sprung of nobler stock, and never will I rest until my real father be found."

This saying made Cullan sad, and yet he would not break his word, and so summoned all his warriors to the banquet hall to bid farewell to Cuchulain and Laeg. Also, he bade his steward bring the gifts he would give to his faithful friend; first were brought in a crimson cloak with brooch of gold, and a goodly buckler of red wood having the rim bound with steel whereon were carved strange devices of animals and men, said to have been wrought by goblin hands in days of old. Next came the arms of manhood, but these Cuchulain would not accept, saying that none but King Connor Mac Nessa himself should arm him.

Gladly Cuchulain thanked Cullan for his generous gifts, swinging the cloak about his shoulders and binding the buckler on his arm; Cullan then accompanied Cuchulain and Laeg to the gate of the fortress, and there stood two glorious horses, a superb black, known throughout Ireland as "Black Sainglend" and "the Grey of Macha," fully equipped with chariot harness; fondly Laeg bade them farewell, for often had he tended and driven them.

Then spoke Cullan. "Cuchulain, from me thou wilt not take the arms of manhood, but at least thou wilt let me horse thy war-chariot with the two finest horses in all Ireland. Think well, Fergus said that when thou diest in thy standing thy horse, a grey, shall be with thee, and what steed more fitting such a warrior as thou shalt be than "the Grey of Macha"—refuse not then my gift, I beg of thee."

Amazed at the richness of the gift, Cuchulain stood mute with thanks, whilst Laeg, in a transport of delight, fondled the horses who were now to be his constant charge.

Loud cheered the warriors as these two fared forth to face the world, but Cullan was inconsolable in his grief at the departure of one whom he cherished as an only son.

Once fairly set upon their way, Cuchulain began to cast about him what next to do; that night they rested in a cave upon the hillside, and over the evening meal, Laeg suggested that they should journey on to Tailti, where Cuchulain might take part in the Lugnasard,* a fair founded by Lugh, the God of Light, at which all the great men of the land contended in all manly sports for the Championship of Ireland.

Feeling that the relaxation of sport would be a welcome change after his nights of lonely vigil or stark fighting, Cuchulain welcomed the suggestion.

Next morning they set off early, and travelling by easy stages reached Tailti on the third day without misadventure.

The first day of the meeting was devoted to horse races, but here Cuchulain could not shine, for the people, recognising "Black Sainglend" and "the Grey of Macha," would not race their horses against them. Cuchulain, therefore, had to curb his impatience and wait for the personal contests of wrestling, leaping, running, discus, javelin and hammer-throwing, which would take place on the next two days.

The time of the horse races was therefore spent in going with Laeg over the ground where the athletes would contend on the morrow.

Next day the sports commenced early, Cuchulain, an almost unknown man, winning both the short and long courses with the utmost ease from many champions.

Next followed the wrestling, and here Laeg begged him not to compete, as he had not yet come to his full strength, but Cuchulain would not be persuaded. In the first round he was drawn against the doughty Curoi.

Now they stand face to face in the ring, both stripped to the waist, Cuchulain slender and graceful as a willow, the beauteous muscles rippling strongly 'neath his fair skin, Curoi black and hair-clad as a goblin, with great

* This Lugnasard was in reality a great annual fair, held in honour of the marriage of Talti, daughter of the King of the land of the dead, to King Eochy Mac Euc, and this place is known to the present day as Telltown, or Teltin.—Author.

masses of knotted muscles shewing on his limbs and body. Softly laughed a maid amidst the throng. "Lo! Lugh and the earth-dweller are met at last." Loud laughed the people, but Curoi did not laugh; he ground his teeth instead!

The word is given, and round each other they circle, with outstretched arms held low, circling and waiting for a chance to rush in and risk a throw. Soon Curoi rushes in, gripping Cuchulain about the middle, striving to swing him off his feet, but the young man's stand is firm and in no wise may he be moved; then Cuchulain, in his turn, puts forth his might, but his foot slips and down he goes on his back, fairly thrown.

Time to regain their breath is allowed, but soon they stand again within the ring, and this time Cuchulain determines to make no mistake. Low they bend as they circle; Curoi rushes in to get the master grip again, but Cuchulain, not to be caught unawares a second time, supples his body at the waist and, handing off his opponent, grapples him about the middle, hugging him until he gasps for breath, and all the while striving to bend him back. But lad's strength is not man's strength, and full well Cuchulain knows that unless he can swing his opponent clear of the ground and throw him, his own strength will be spent, therefore he must have recourse to craft. Almost imperceptibly appearing to weaken, he waits till Curoi puts out his leg to knock his heels from under him, and then while his antagonist's weight is all on one foot, he puts forth his might and heaves Curoi over his shoulder, so that he lies stunned and battered on the earth.

Wildly clamour all the people then, for never had such wrestling been seen in Ireland within the memory of man; but the effort had been almost too much for the immature youth, whose whole frame shakes with shuddering breath, while the blood gushes forth from his mouth and ears. Yet they have still another bout to wrestle, and though Curoi has had a fearful fall no man yet may say how the contest will end.

Resting time seems all too short, and once again the

two stand face to face; Curoi's laboured breathing attests how hardly matters have gone with him, while Cuchulain's eyes are ringed about with dark circles and the blood still trickles stickily from the corners of his nostrils.

Heavily Curoi rushes and tiredly Cuchulain evades him, again and yet again, but this may not last, and soon Cuchulain is swept within that dire embrace; so now they stand panting and striving and neither has the advantage of the other, for Cuchulain again has his feet firmly planted and gives not an inch. Mightily they strive, standing almost still while the muscles start out upon their bodies like knotted whipcord; but this may not endure, flesh and blood cannot stand so terrific a strain, and slowly, inch by inch, Cuchulain is lifted up and up; now they crash to earth like two mighty forest oaks falling before the gale, but neither man is on his back, although Curoi has the advantage.

Then Laeg shouts high above the clamour of the onlookers: "For the honour of the Red Branch, Cuchulain, be not beaten, get free of him."

Cuchulain hears and, letting go his grip, rolls free and springs upon his feet, and now the work is all to do again; but this time Cuchulain takes the offensive and, rushing on his foe, grapples him, one arm about his middle and one behind his thighs. Almost before men can see what is happening he puts forth all his might in a last desperate effort and, swinging Curoi clear of the ground, sends him crashing to earth well outside the ring, fair on his back, and straightway himself falls down fainting, lying there like a corpse, the black bruises shewing livid against the whiteness of his skin.

Laeg springs forward to raise his beloved master, tears of joy coursing unchecked down his cheeks, while the air is rent with the acclamations of the people at the prowess of this glorious youth, who has overcome the mightiest champion in all Ireland; but Cuchulain is all spent and the bleeding has burst forth again.

Tenderly the people bear him away, and for that day he can compete no more, so that the javelin throwing

and the roth cleas* go by without the hero of the Red Branch Hostel being able to do any other great deed. At that Cuchulain is sore vexed. That night Laeg went out beyond the town and with a stone from his sling killed a wild duck and, stripping the flesh from it, took the fat of the breast and therewith anointed his master from head to foot, and after rubbing him thoroughly mixed him a strong concoction of wine and honey, which caused him to fall into a long and dreamless slumber, from which he awoke next morning thoroughly refreshed and once more supple in all his limbs, but with the bruises still there standing out blue and livid on his white skin.

Now that morning Cuchulain arrayed himself in the garments which Cullan had given him at their parting. On his feet were light, strong shoes, and his legs were cross-gartered in emerald green; his kilt was of blue, as was the loose smock which hung straight down from his shoulders, while over all Laeg threw the crimson cloak, clasping it across his chest with the golden brooch of Cullan. About his head was bound a fillet, also of emerald green.

After a simple breakfast of goat's milk and cheese the two fared forth to the sports ground, where the country people were already assembling to witness the young boys' races, which would be decided first.

On a piece of rising ground at the side of the arena sat the nobles of the district to watch the sport, lords and ladies together, arrayed in gorgeous garments, making a wonderful blaze of colour in the early morning sunlight; opposite and at the centre of the arena upon the other side a space was reserved for the champions, while all around the rest of the ring were assembled the country folk, loudly discussing the chances of their favourites or talking over the wonderful wrestling of the stranger-youth upon the day before.

Many were the conjectures as to who he was and whether he would compete in the discus throwing—the

* Roth cleas=hammer throwing.

last hero-feat to be decided that day; one maiden in the crowd—she who yesterday had likened him to Lugh and Curoi to the earth-dweller—was particularly persistent in singing his praises and acclaiming him as more than mortal man.

On reaching the ground Cuchulain went quietly and unrecognised to the champions' enclosure, while Laeg roamed around the crowd until he found the maiden who had sung his master's praises and who on the yesterday had wiped the blood away from his mouth and nostrils with her kerchief.

The early part of the morning was taken up with the running of the little lads' races, which, needless to say, delighted the parents of the youngsters more than anyone else. About mid-day a hush of expectation came over the spectators as one by one the champions strolled into the arena, chatting together and walking around to observe the lie of the land whereon they were to throw the discus.

Anxiously Laeg and his companion watch for the coming of Cuchulain, nor are their minds put at rest when the horn is wound to assemble the throwers to hear the conditions of competition called out by the judges. Just as the judge is about to commence, a shout of welcome goes up from the people as Cuchulain, in his flaming cloak, vaults lightly over the palisade and joins the heroes in the centre of the arena.

The conditions are recited and all men stand back while the first thrower takes up the stone and, swinging it lightly across his body, turns rapidly and sends it hurtling on its flight; another and another follow in quick succession, each man walking forward after his throw to observe his mark. Now it is Cuchulain's turn; quietly he slips the crimson cloak from off his shoulders, and it is seen that he has discarded his under smock, so that he stands forth in all his slim beauty with kilt caught up to the hips, and the sun flashing back from the marble whiteness of his upper limbs. Taking his stand within the ring, slowly he swings the discus across his body, once, twice and yet again, and then with arms outstretched

he whirls around at lightning speed and with a final sweep of the throwing arm he sends the missile cleaving through the air, scaling beautifully and at such a pace that the eye can hardly follow its flight. Low bend the marksmen and competitors as it speeds on its way, humming like a swarm of bees in summer, while a gasp of wonder goes up from the people as the discus nearly buries itself in earth, full twenty paces beyond the farthest cast of any other competitor.

Then babel breaks forth and the air is rent with wild Celtic shouts in honour of the mighty throw.

Again and again the other champions throw, putting forth all their skill and muscle to overcast Cuchulain's throw; but there is no need for him to throw again, for his cast still stands out alone, well beyond full twenty others.

The contests over, Cuchulain is led up by the judges to take the sword, buckler and rings, which are the rewards for his prowess in the running races, wrestling, and discus throwing.

As the prizes are given up speaks the greatest chieftain of them all. "Who art thou, boy, who these days past hast put our mightiest champions to open shame? Methinks thou must be sprung from some high stock to shew such prowess in thy early youth, and Ireland shall hear more of thy deeds before the tale be told, if thou shalt prove as mighty in deeds of war as thou hast done in games of sport."

Then Cuchulain sang this song:

"I am Setanta, son of the Craobh Ruadh,*
Son of Dectera, men say sired by Sualtam,
But I know a higher source from whence doth my
 blood flow,
I am Setanta whom men call Cuchulain
Because noble Cullan chose me for his watchdog
After the slaying of his hound in the night time.
I am Cuchulain who beat back the free raiders

* Pronounced Creve Roe, means the Red Branch.

Holding the dūn safe while Cullan was arming.
Of me Druid Morann told in a vision
How Kings and sages shall tell of my prowess.
How I shall guard the fords and right the wrongs of
 our people,
Yet all my mighty deeds lie in the future,
Soon shall ye hear of me, people of Erin!"

Thus singing he gathered up his trophies and walked
from the ground, followed in silence by Laeg, while all
men wondered at these strange sayings.

That night Cuchulain and his charioteer lay at Tailti.

CHAPTER III

THE morning after the sports broke in sullen clouds, the hills were shrouded in mists of rain and altogether it was as uninviting a day as two travellers could possibly have chosen for their faring forth. None-the-less Cuchulain was determined to set out on the journey to Emain Macha and the Court of King Conor Mac Nessa.

Wherefore he bade Laeg load their goods onto the "Grey of Macha" and "Black Sainglend," that they might start upon the journey directly the morning meal was over.

While the two horses were being loaded and a meal prepared, Cuchulain went out alone into the town and purchased two more horses whereon he and Laeg might ride and lead the chariot horses laden with their goods.

Many people having been to the fair during the past few days, most of the horses in the town had been sold or had changed owners. It was therefore somewhat difficult to find two reliable animals of known antecedents for sale. After wandering from place to place until his patience was thoroughly outworn he at last came up with a farmer on the outskirts of the town, who was taking a string of wild-looking colts back home after the fair.

A great deal of bickering then ensued as to the relative merits of the various horses and the price the farmer was willing to take for them. Cuchulain tried all the more likely looking ones and now began to be sorry that he had not brought Laeg with him, as the latter's knowledge of horseflesh would have proved invaluable. However, after much haggling, he picked upon two sturdy-looking country cobs and paid the farmer about half the price he had originally asked for them.

Returning to the hostel with his newly acquired possessions Cuchulain ate a hasty breakfast, and now that the morning was well up they started upon their journey in the drizzling rain.

All day long they toiled on up the hills, gradually getting wetter and wetter until the cold Irish rain had chilled them to the bone. About midday, they halted in a thicket to rest their horses and to eat a hasty meal, then on they journey again till, in the late afternoon the rain began to clear off and the sun to shine when they were approaching the last slope up to the top of the chain of hills.

Halting here on the slope, they decided to camp for the night and to finish the climb and descend to the plain on the far side upon the following day. After a brief search a suitable cave was found wherein the horses were stabled and a fire built in the entrance by which the food was cooked. After the meal had been eaten the wayfarers took off their clothes and spread them by the blaze to dry, and wrapping themselves in spare cloaks which had been kept dry in the bundles carried on the chariot horses, soon fell asleep.

With the first breath of the dawn wind Laeg awoke and rousing his master before it was yet light, they groomed and loaded up the horses and pushed on up the hills eating the cold meat left over from last night's meal as they went.

Just as the first light of dawn began to gild the roseate sky, the summit of the ascent was reached and then what a view of beauty burst upon their eyes. From the horizon right up to high heaven the golden winged messengers of the day were speeding across the sky, here tinging a dull and lowering mass of cloud with palest edge of gold, there blazing in rampant splendour through the swirling mists, mounting, ever mounting, up the sky; first breaking up the sombre purple of the night in primrose and salmon pinks, till finally the day was born in golden splendour and the sun burst forth to suck up the humid vapours of the night.

From the high point on which they stood a glorious panorama was spread out before them, first the gently sloping ridges of the hills, chain upon chain, topped with the filigree tracery of trees, delicately tinged by the new-born sun. Down, down their gaze was led by the course of

a tumbling brook rising almost at their feet and gradually widening out into a noble river winding away across the plain over which were sparsely scattered old farm towns.

For a while even these rough sons of a rough age stood gazing enraptured at this lovely scene, then slowly they began the descent of the hills into the valley, passing sometimes over the stark nakedness of the hills, sometimes through a rugged gorge and sometimes through a sylvan glen with fern-clad, dew-bespangled sides.

At last the plain was reached and now they were confronted with the problem of how to cross the river which had looked so tiny from the heights but which, on nearer inspection, proved to be a roaring torrent swelled by the rains of yesterday.

First the horses were hobbled and allowed to graze off the luscious grass, and then up and down the bank of the river Cuchulain and Laeg hunted for indications of a ford. After much weary searching, tracks of animals and chariots were found leading down to a break in the steeply shelving bank, and now arose the question, would it be safe to attempt the passage of the river in its present swollen condition?

Laeg thought it would be best to wait, but Cuchulain was anxious to push on and sleep under shelter that night if possible at one of the farmsteads which could be seen on the far side of the water.

The horses were brought down to the river. Cuchulain mounted the country-bred bought in Tailti the day before, and led the "Grey of Macha" by the bridle. Laeg kept by their heads coaxing them with voice and hand till they were well into the water and then with a final smack urged them on; slowly the water mounted first to the belly-band, then to the rider's knee and still up until all foothold was lost and the horses were swimming hard. Presently they struggled up the bank and stood with heaving sides while Cuchulain slipped from the saddle and shouted to Laeg to make the passage quickly.

And now Laeg mounts and leads "Black Sainglend" to the water but the horse snorts and planting his fore feet firmly on the bank, draws back in terror from the

swirling flood; to make matters worse, the horse Laeg rides catches the infection and rears violently, but Laeg is a splendid horseman, he sits down firmly in his seat, controlling his restive steeds with iron will and slowly forces them forward as only your born horseman can; at last they take the water and begin to swim, but the country-bred cob is not so strong as the one Cuchulain rides and begins to be borne down stream by the current, and now Laeg is in a quandary. If he looses "Black Sainglend" he may go back and be difficult to catch, if on the other hand he sticks to them both they may all be washed away together.

Cuchulain shouts to him to leave the horses and save himself, but this he will not do, for all Cuchulain's gear is on the chariot horse; therefore he gives the black a cut with his switch and slipping from his saddle, winds his fingers in the cob's mane and swimming beside him on the near side whispers encouragingly in his ear, meanwhile forcing him slowly upstream towards the landing place; Cuchulain catches "Black Sainglend" as he lands, meanwhile Laeg and the cob struggle on until they emerge on the bank, both absolutely exhausted, and there they rest awhile before they push on to the nearest farm, where they crave a night's shelter.

That night after supper, when the drinking horns were filled and the men drew round the fireplace, the farmer, a boon companion of the old King's fighting tail, commenced the story of the Curse of Macha. As the Curse of Macha and the Ultonian debility play a considerable part in the after life of Cuchulain, the story will be given as nearly as possible as the farmer told it.

THE FARMER'S STORY.

"When I was a hale man, young Sirs, taking a pride in my youth and strength I served the King in many wars and saw a great many things, some good but many bad, and the worst I ever saw was that which the King did to Macha, the wife of Crundchu, my old companion in arms.

"After the long war Crundchu took to himself a wife out of the captives we had taken and settled down on a farmsteading of his own, but for me, I was never a marrying man, kisses never came to me as easily as blows, so I stayed on in the service.

"Still I did not altogether lose sight of Crundchu, as might well have been expected, for he was a famous hand at the roth-cleas,* and used always to come in to the games at the festivals and holidays.

"For many years my old friend lived happily with his captive bride; indeed they were almost too happy, and the Fates took their revenge as is ever the way, and she died suddenly of an unknown sickness; for many months he was inconsolable in his grief until one day a strange and beautiful woman came to his steading and took upon herself the duties of the housewife, and that night she accompanied him to the bed-place and lay by his side within his arms until the dawning.

"For many months they lived thus as true man and wife; until one day she told him that in course of time he would be a father. This greatly delighted Crundchu, for he had no children by his first wife, and as you all know the soldier ever hopes to have a son to follow in his steps, though the battle parting must weigh heavy on his soul some day. Months went by and Macha's time of coming to the joy and sorrow of woman drew near.

"Now about this time we returned from a great foray and the King declared the games to celebrate our success. Crundchu of course was asked, but Macha begged hard of him not to leave her and when she found that he was fain to go she besought him to say nothing of her as she might only stay with him so long as he did not talk of her in a public assembly.

"That morning Crundchu put on his best apparel and started off for the games; the morning was devoted to the soldiers' sports, and as usual Crundchu won the roth cleas. At midday we fed heartily and drank much,

* Wheel feat=hammer throwing.

Crundchu more than most of us; after the feast we all betook ourselves to the sports ground again to see the horse racing to which great chieftains came from all over the country to match their steeds against one another.

"In the racing the King's steeds won race after race until His Majesty arose and said, 'Let us cease this folly, for in all Ireland there is not a single horse or mortal who can match my horses, nor in all the world do I think there will be found anything to match them in pace.'

"'Pooh!' said Crundchu, who was full of strong ale, 'at home I have a wife who can outrun them with the greatest ease.'

"'Take that man,' said the King in a rage, 'and keep him safe till this wife of whom he boasts so readily be brought here, and if she cannot beat my horses then strike off his head.'

"At this saying we were very sad, for Crundchu had been a good companion in camp and on the battlefield in his fighting days.

"Then messengers were dispatched to bring Macha to the Court, but that night there was no merriment at the feasting, for we were all sorry for the fate of Crundchu, whom we thought was doomed.

"Next morning the messengers returned with Macha and we saw that she was great with child, and then we murmured loudly, for it seemed unfair to us that any woman should be asked to run a race so close to her time, and very eloquently Macha pleaded with the King for the race to be postponed until her child was born, but he was as adamant, and curtly bade her prepare for the contest.

"Thereat Macha appealed to us to help her, but there were many strangers from far parts of Ulster at the meeting who only mocked her, and against so many and the King's own guards we could do naught.

"Macha seeing that there was no pity to be had from the savage onlookers girt up her gravied loins and bade bring forth the horses, but before she ran she put her curse upon us. 'Oh men of Ulster! this day you have put a great shame upon me, but a greater shame shall fall upon you; from this hour the strength shall go from

you as from a woman in her travail, in the hour of your greatest need, and this shall be upon you for five days and four nights. This curse shall hold until the ninth generation, yet this I also prophesy, that a youth shall save your honour at the last.'

"Then she raced and outran the horses, but after she had passed the winning post she gave a heartrending cry and falling down gave birth to twin children, and thereafter she disappeared and so Crundchu lost his wife and went back to his lonely home.

"And now, young Sirs, my story is finished, and we must go to rest, for you will wish to be early on your way to-morrow, but it was the most shameful sight I ever saw among many shameful sights in a long life of fighting; and now at last I have come to my rest in this quiet farmstead."

Over this strange story Cuchulain pondered long, wondering who might be the youth who should save the honour of Ulster when the Ultonian Debility should be upon the men.

Presently the farmer departed to his bed place, the others rolling themselves in their cloaks lay down around the hearth; gradually the firelight died down until naught could be seen but an occasional flicker from the embers reflected on the ceiling beams; at last the room was hushed in sleep, only disturbed by the deep and regular breathing of the sleepers and the persistent chirping of a cricket.

The breaking of dawn discovered the boon companions of yestereve still slumbering soundly round the cold and ashy hearth; first the light came in a long streak of primrose hue, next the sun shone redly through the windows for an instant, fading again as quickly as it had come, and then the fragments of last night's repast which strewed the table, and the scattered drinking horns upon the floor shewed forth under the full light of day. First one and then another of the sleepers awoke, stretching and yawning and gazing round with sleep-dimmed eyes, before sauntering forth to view the day.

Laeg arose and gathering up his arms seated himself

outside in the sunlight to remove from the weapons the traces of yesterday's immersion in the river, but Cuchulain seated himself on a bench gazing thoughtfully into the dead ashes, pondering still upon the farmer's story.

Presently the women began to come in to clear away the remains of last night's meal and to furbish up the room.

When they saw their master's guest sitting there moody and alone, they curtsied and would have withdrawn but he seemed to feel their presence, and without looking up motioned to them with his hand to go about their accustomed tasks.

After awhile the men returned, carrying logs of wood and kindling, which they piled into the hearth, for although the time was summer the early mornings were yet full cold. Then an old carlin knelt before the hearth and touched the kindling to a blaze with flint and steel; soon the fire caught hold of the logs and a blaze was roaring up the chimney, lending a warmth and homeliness to the hitherto bleak apartment.

Once the fire was fairly blazing great hooks were brought in and fastened to the jacks, which were driven firmly into the wall above the hearth, and on these hooks were hung immense slabs of venison and mutton hams, with dishes placed beneath to catch the fat; mugs of foaming ale were set down upon the hearth to warm, oaten cakes were made in plenty, and the preparations for breakfast were complete. Meanwhile Laeg had finished his polishing of the weapons, groomed the horses and arranged the bundles, so that it only remained to eat the meal, load the horses, bid farewell to their host and take the road once more.

Just as Laeg returned from his duties the farmer entered through the opposite door and bade them to the table, talking while they ate, of the journey they must make; soon the meal was over. Laeg put the packages upon the chariot horses' backs, the cobs were mounted and the wanderers started upon their journey amid many

a hearty wish from the jolly old soldier-farmer and his retainers.

All day long they travelled easily through the lush and fertile plain lands, and just as evening was falling came in sight of Emain Macha, the capital of Ulster, set upon a hill.

Now Emain Macha was a city built by the five captive princes under the direction of Macha; its name means "The Brooch of Macha," and is so named because with the pin of her great brooch she marked out the site upon the ground. The city was composed of a central fortress in which the holder of the Ard-Rieship * kept his court; surrounding the fortress were the dwellings of the soldiers, retainers and lesser lords, while the whole was protected by a circular rampart and beyond that a deep ditch kept filled with water from a spring within the precincts of the fortress courtyard.

Here King Connor Mac Nessa kept high state, and here it was that Cuchulain's mother Dectera dwelt, and here that he had received his early training, before he went to the dūn of Cullan.

Well can one imagine Cuchulain's joy at the first sight of his early home after an absence of nearly two years, and the eagerness with which he looked forward to meeting his mother, the King his cousin, Cathbad his grandfather, and Conall (later known as Conall of the Victories) his youthful friend and cousin.

Now when they had ascended the hill and drawn near to the gate in the ramparts, it was about the time of the evening meal, so that all men were within the fortress except the sentries, who alone observed their approach.

Cuchulain, with the memories of childhood bright before his eyes, advanced straight up to the main gate used only by persons of high degree.

More than a year had passed since Cuchulain was last at Emain Macha, and the sentry, a young man new to the service of King Connor, knew not the boy. Moreover observing the high quality of the led horses and

* High Kingship.

the travel-stained appearance of the two travellers, he thought them but horse boys leading their masters' steeds of war, and bade them roughly to halt saying:

"Thou art over fast, my lad, to enter into Emain Macha by the way of thy betters. Go round to the low gate which is for horse boys and scullions such as thou. I know not the quality of thy master, and certain 'tis that if he prove not of higher degree than his servant's appearance indicates, neither he nor thou wilt enter by the high gate of King Connor."

"Out of the way, thou low fellow," answered Cuchulain. "I come by right of birth, using the high, low or middle way as seemest to me best! No man's servant am I, but of the blood royal."

At this the soldier laughed heartily, and as Cuchulain still advanced prodded him back with the butt of his spear shaft.

Instantly Cuchulain snatched the javelin from his grasp and with one shake of his hand shattered it in pieces, and drawing his sword belaboured the man heartily with the flat of the blade, and then changing his purpose began to swing the edge, letting the sword pass up and down and around the man not an inch from his limbs.

"Stand still, thou!" shouted Laeg. "This is Cuchulain, hope of the Red Branch, and now indeed we shall see swordsmanship worthy of watching."

By this time the soldier's shouts have attracted other men at arms who stand amazed, watching the perfect control of the weapon as it flashes, circles and hums in the air, outlining the man's limbs in a living stream of steel, while he stands, white and still, fearing his fate. On swings the sword and is brought crashing down towards his skull to be stopped with a jerk of the wrist within an inch of his scalp.

Calmly Cuchulain sheaths his sword and speaks to the trembling sentry. "Remember, fool, I am an evil man to cross, and let this be a lesson to thee to be civil to strangers," and then, tearing his doublet open at the breast, "Behold the mark of the Red Branch, at sight of which all men uncover."

Cuchulain calls up two men-at-arms to take the horses and see them properly stabled, groomed and fed, then, followed by Laeg, he strides through the gate into the dūn of Emain Macha.

Right through the outer guard he marches and on into the hall itself, where the King and all his company are set at meat.

"Hail, King Connor," he cries, "greet thou now an offshoot of the Red Branch."

"Who art thou," answers the King, "who comest to my hall unheralded to lay bold claim to kinship with the Blood?"

None knew him but his mother Dectera, who, uttering a cry, "It is my son Setanta," ran from her seat at the high table to embrace him.

Hastily a place is set for him at the high table, and he is plied with questions, but Cuchulain will say nothing until he has fed.

A jug of foaming ale is set before him and a great venison pasty; then when his hunger is assuaged, Cuchulain tells them all the tale of his doings since last they saw him at the dūn of Cullan on the evening of the slaying of the hound.

Greatly they marvel at the prowess of one so young and eagerly they question him, gazing curiously at Laeg, his charioteer, and at the trophies he has brought from Tailti, and heartily they laugh when the story of the sentry's discomfiture is told; but of the story of the Curse of Macha told to him by the farmer, Cuchulain says nothing.

After the questions of the King and his warriors have been answered, Cuchulain goes with his mother to her bower, and there he questions her keenly as to his parentage.

"Mother! men say Sualtam fathered me! and yet I can not believe that such as I am sprung from any humble stock; wilt thou not tell me the secret of my birth?"

"Nay, my son, this may not be," Dectera answers sadly. "Of a truth Sualtam was no sire of thine, no

bodach * could father such as thou. Dost thou not remember a voice speaking to thee from the darkness when thy sword was raised to slaughter Laeg? Surely that was thy father's voice, but more than this I dare not say, for I am under geise not to tell thee of this matter. This I may tell thee; that in the hour of thy greatest need thy father shall come to thee, as also he shall shew thee thy way in a lost land once,—but once only. Also, by reason of thy father's power, thou art free of the Curse of Macha of which I will tell thee some day."

"Of the Curse of Macha I already know somewhat," answered Cuchulain, "but this I swear by the Light above me; to search for my father always and to refuse no combat that may bring him to my side, no matter how great the odds against me may be, and may the Heavens fall and crush me if I break this my oath."

Dectera started violently and looked suspiciously at Cuchulain at his reference to "the Light above me." However, she said nothing and the incident passed.

For some time the mother talked to the warlike youth now seated quietly at her feet, asking him those simple, seemingly guileless questions such as only a mother can devise to search the heart's truth from her offspring, but the answers came readily from this clean-hearted youth, and in him she found neither knowledge of woman nor of the lustful ways of man; all gold was his soul and infantlike the purity of his mind, so that the mother-heart was set at rest from the doubting which had arisen when first she looked upon the fresh young manhood and the glorious beauty of the son whom she had not seen for so long.

When they parted, Cuchulain gave her his mouth to kiss, which is not always a mother's place when the youth is nearly a man full grown.

After this followed many months of quiet and peaceful life at Emain Macha, but Cuchulain was not one to let his body wax soft in idleness, so each day he practised

* Bodach = farmer.

riding or chariot driving under the eye of Laeg, whose knowledge of horses and their ways was almost uncanny, or exercised himself in arms with his cousin Conall, to whom he became more and more attached as time went on until these two became like David and Jonathan in their love and comradeship. And so time went on until Conall, who was the elder, was sent to the court of Greece, to learn somewhat of the art and culture of the Greeks. Very hard Cuchulain begged to be allowed to go with his friend, but this the King, influenced no doubt by Dectera, would not permit; further, he loved the lad and liked always to have him near him.

About this time Cuchulain was drafted into the Boy Corps of Emain Macha, a corps composed of the sons of chieftains of all the provinces, numbering about one hundred and fifty in all, resident at the Court, to be brought up to the profession of arms and in the noble ways suited to the blood they boasted.

In this company Cuchulain soon rose to distinction by reason of his wonderful prowess in arms. At the head of the band was King Connor's own son Follaman, a good and fearless youth and a great friend of Cuchulain's, but his greatest friend, now that Connall had gone to Greece, was Ferdia, son of Firbolg Daman.

At the Court was also another band of boys, who, not being suited to the rough soldier's life, were being trained up for the priesthood by Cathbad, the chief Druid, who was Cuchulain's grandfather.

One day when the Boy Corps was out exercising, their manœuvres brought them to the precincts of the Druid's School where old Cathbad was instructing his pupils in the art of divination.

The day being hot, and the warlike exercises having lasted many hours, Follaman ordered the Boy Corps to lie down upon the grass to rest, which they did, some drawing food from their wallets to refresh themselves, while others wandered idly about watching the priestly scholars at their studies; among those looking on was Cuchulain.

Now it so happened that as Cuchulain drew near to

the Druid's school one of the pupils asked Cathbad what kind of enterprise would succeed if taken in hand that day. Cathbad, to humour the youth, who was a favourite pupil of his, bade all of them be silent while he worked a spell.

Having made his signs upon the ground and carefully considered the matter for some time, the learned man spoke. "To him who shall this day assume the arms of manhood, all honour! To him who shall this day put on the gear of war, great glory and a deathless name, for he shall be the foremost champion of Ireland. Great shall be his deeds and great the love that men and women shall give to him, yet sorrow dogs his steps for the little span of his life, and soon he shall tread the rainbow bridge which leads to the great beyond. Yet he shall win to his heart's desire and find that which is lost."

"Stay! surely such a one is with us even now." Keenly the old man looked around him with his piercing gaze seeking if he might divine to whom the horoscope related; but Cuchulain, who felt that the prophecy related to him, turned away and covered his face with his shield lest his grandsire should recognise him and remember the prophecy made at his birth by the Druid Morann, for it was not his wish that his destiny should be revealed at that time to his youthful comrades in arms.

Just then a bell began to ring from the Druid's Sanctuary and, the morning lesson being over, the pupils trooped quietly in to prayer, two by two, with heads reverently bent and arms folded upon their breasts, while before them stately paced the ancient Druid leaning on his staff, truly a venerable figure clothed in a robe of blue and white, with his long and flowing snowy beard, his bald leaf-crowned head, piercing eyes, large hooked nose and gigantic stature.

As the young priests passed, all the Boy Corps stood up and saluted them, then forming up their ranks, proceeded on their way back to Emain Macha, Follaman saying as they moved off: "Well, my brothers, every man to his taste, I suppose! but for me I would rather serve all my days as a common soldier in the service of the King than

see a hundred victims lie upon the Stone of Sacrifice and me chief Druid."

A ripple of laughter ran along the ranks, for their leader had ever a droll tongue.

All the long way back to Emain Macha, Cuchulain was silent, brooding in his dark Celtic mind on the words that had dropped from Cathbad's lips, nor could his comrades anyway rouse him from his reverie as they marched at ease, enlivening the way with song and joke, until the fortress loomed in sight and they were brought to march at attention. With spears properly sloped and shield on arm the Corps marched into the dūn, formed into line and were dismissed by their leader.

As is ever the way with soldiers, they stood about for a few minutes on the parade ground chatting in groups, and then a horn was blown and they strolled casually away to partake of the meal prepared against their return.

Not so Cuchulain; all the long march home he had been turning the matter over and over in his mind, and knowing that he was almost of the age to assume the arms of manhood, he had now made up his mind to anticipate things a little and to ask the King himself that very day to arm and equip him.

All dusty as he was, Cuchulain marched boldly into the great hall and right up to the high dais where the King was resting after a hunting expedition and talking over the day's sport with Fergus and other of his companions and chiefs.

A noble group they made there in the great hall, the last rays of the setting sun seeming to be caught up and held in the colours of their raiment. In the middle lounged the King, a great bronzed man with ruddy chestnut beard and brawny arms, his form encased in sombre garments of russet brown, while from his shoulders fell a cloak of dull red material; the woollen hose upon his legs were cross-gartered in red, about his massive neck was set a torque of red gold, and on his left arm above the elbow a bangle of the same metal; at his side a long sword hung, and beside him lay a couple of javelins and

the buckler he had just cast down; at his feet his great wolf-hounds reclined, looking up in his face with eyes of canine devotion.

At the King's right hand stood Fergus, clad in green from tip to toe and leaning on his spear; a hard and keen looking man, the King's champion, not over big, indeed he looked a mere stripling beside Conor Mac Nessa, and yet his name was known and feared by every evil doer in Ulster, by reason of the mighty deeds he had done and the stark justice he had meted out at the King's behest.

Next to Fergus Mac Roy stood Felim, the son of Dall an old-time friend of the King. This Felim was a dark and heavy man of mighty stature who seldom smiled and—men said—was the most evil man in all Ulster to cross in his cups, or when he was angered; as became his nature, he was clad in sombre black from head to foot, but relieved the dull effect by the gold braiding of his cloak and kilt, the gold cross-gartering of his hose, and the massive brooch of dull red gold with which his cloak was fastened. Next to Felim stood Firbolg Daman, the father of Ferdia, Cuchulain's dearest comrade in the Boy Corps of Emain Macha.

Around the King were other courtiers; at his right hand sat Dectera and her maidens variously dressed in gay garments.

As Cuchulain entered the hall, Felim had just finished speaking and had bidden the King, his courtiers and the Chief Druid to a feast he would make at his dūn in the King's honour in a month's time. This invitation the King had gladly accepted, for after fighting and hunting he loved feasting best.

The King at that moment, turning his head to speak to Dectera, observed Cuchulain standing at the foot of the dais.

"What would'st thou with me, boy?" asked he.

"Grant me the arms of manhood, Sire," replied Cuchulain.

"How may this be, for surely thou art not a man full grown and would but find the soldier's weapons all too great for thee?"

"Not so, Sire! Already I have done some small deeds of which it becomes me not to speak, and methinks the weapons of King Conon's self were not too mighty for my grasp."

"Well," said the King, laughing tolerantly, "let us try thee," and calling to the guard he bade him bring two stout javelins, but these Cuchulain shook in his hands until the shafts were shattered. Then they brought him other and stronger weapons, but these he shook to pieces also; next a great war sword was brought to him and this he whirled around and stopping it with a cunning jerk of his wrist, caused the blade to snap off short by the hilt.

Turning to the King he said: "Sire! if I have now satisfied thee that I can indeed bear arms wilt thou deign to watch my horsemanship to see if I am yet worthy to harness the horses, given me by Cullan, to a chariot of war?"

Permission being given, Cuchulain went off in search of Laeg to bid him prepare and bring forth "the Grey of Macha" and "Black Sainglend."

While Laeg was making ready the horses Cuchulain went again within the dūn, to prepare himself; he washed the dust from his face and limbs, combed out his hair, bound a fillet of gold about his brow and put the garments given him by Cullan upon his body and the shield of Cullan upon his arm, but the arms of boyhood he left behind him, knowing full well that before sunset greater weapons than these would be given him by the King.

Meanwhile the King and his Court had assembled on an open space in front of the dūn to see Cuchulain pass his tests. On the far side of the plain was drawn up the Boy Corps to watch their comrade's feats; by them on the grass were three chariots of different kinds, which Cuchulain must himself drive and afterwards shew feats of arms in, while Laeg, his charioteer, controlled the horses.

A murmur of admiration went up from the assembled people as Cuchulain stepped upon the ground, followed by Laeg leading the two noble horses with every accoutre-

ment as speckless as the care of the good charioteer could make it.

The horses were led up to the King for his inspection. At a sign from him, four of the young soldiers of the Boy Corps dashed out from the ranks and advanced across the sward dragging behind them the lightest of the three chariots.

To this chariot the horses were rapidly hitched up; Cuchulain sprang lightly upon the footboard, standing gracefully with feet well apart, his body swaying easily to the excited plunging of the horses, to whose heads Laeg hung tenaciously awaiting the King's signal to let them go.

The King's arm is raised. Laeg springs back, and the horses leap madly forward as their bridles are released, spurning the ground from under them and gathering speed with every second.

Firm are the driver's hands upon the reins and perfect his poise while they circle round the course; as the end of the ellipse is reached, Cuchulain weighs sharply on the near side rein and bringing his chariot round on one wheel almost at right angles, dashes madly down the centre of the ground, and turns sharp to the right; when opposite the royal party, he drives straight at them and pulls up dead at the foot of the mound with such suddenness that the axle of the chariot is snapped right through.

Now the King was well pleased with this fine exhibition of driving, but being anxious to test the lad to the utmost he ordered the horses to be harnessed to a second and heavier chariot; when this chariot was brought up Laeg looked at it carefully and observing that it was clumsily made he whispered to his master not to drive in it if he could in any way avoid the test.

Instantly Cuchulain turned towards the mound.

"Your Majesty," said he, "I like not the looks of yonder chariot! Have I your leave to test it with my hands before committing my body to it?"

Fergus and the other chiefs looked much surprised, but the King, suspecting some hidden purpose, granted the request.

Cuchulain now picked up the pole and weighing it in his hands a moment, he began to shake it so that the whole chariot rattled, and finally one of the wheels came off and the sides burst open.

"Ah!" said he, coolly surveying the wreck he had made, "I perceive that this is no proper vehicle in which a man of might may drive two fiery steeds."

At this saying all the courtiers laughed, and the third and heaviest chariot was brought up, the horses hooked in, and without comment Cuchulain mounted to the floor board.

In the first tests it will be remembered that he had confined himself to an exhibition of fast driving and the easy manner in which he could dispose of a chariot which he did not consider suitable to his prowess; but this time he wished to shew the perfect mastery he had over his steeds; therefore, he instantly checked them as they bounded away from the restraining hand of Laeg.

After the first few wild plunges, he broke them into a stately walk, which he increased to a rapid trot and then sent them thundering round the arena at a furious gallop, finally breaking them into a walk again as the circuit was completed; continuing his progress chanting a war song and turning them left-handed at the quarter distance of the ellipse, he advanced towards the mound, still singing and beating time to the music with his foot. Louder and louder rose the song as he advanced, and fiercer yet became the stamping, so that the whole framework shook with the mightiness of the blows, until finally the floor boards were rent asunder as the mound was reached and all men stood amazed at this wonderful exhibition of strength.

And now the King commanded that his own war chariot and weapons should be fetched, and with these—a mighty sword and two stout javelins—he armed Cuchulain; then he bade them harness to the chariot "Black Sainglend" and "the Grey of Macha."

Laeg mounted to the chariot and took up the reins; beside him stood Cuchulain armed in his war gear.

The Boy Corps were placed fifty paces apart around

the arena with orders to cast their javelins at Cuchulain and the charioteer as they passed.

And now the loosened steeds speed madly on their way; as the first thrower is reached Cuchulain bends low, letting the javelin hum harmlessly over his head; the second missile he breaks in mid-air with a cast of his own spear; the third and fourth he catches on his shield, and the fifth he shears through with his sword as it flies, and so on all through the course. Some he dodges, some catches on his shield, and others breaks with his sword, until the last thrower is approached; his javelin he catches in his hand and sends it hurtling back whence it came, so that it stands in the ground beside its owner's foot.

Next he asks two men to stand a hundred paces apart along the centre of the arena with hand on hip leaving a space between the elbow and the side.

The only two who are found willing to take the risk of what is to come are Fergus, the King's champion, and Follaman, the commander of the Boy Corps. So soon as the two are placed in position the chariot comes thundering o'er the sward, and as the first is reached Cuchulain looses a javelin at him which speeds safely between arm and side; again he repeats the performance as the second is passed.

And now a mighty shout of approbation makes the welkin ring, for truly has Cuchulain proved his right to the arms of manhood, and for sign of his approval King Connor bids him to keep the weapons and chariot and to use them well in the cause of Ulster.

Thereafter they all troop back to Emain Macha for the evening meal, and the night is spent in high carouse. Happily the songs of the skalds are listened to, rapidly pass the drinking horns from hand to hand, and many are the tales of deeds of valour of the past which the old warriors tell, until one by one their heads drop upon the board in weariness, or the revellers creep to rest, and the dūn is hushed in the quiet of sleep.

CHAPTER IV

AFTER Cuchulain had assumed the arms of manhood, the weeks passed without incident until it was time for King Conor and his chiefs to journey to the dūn of Felim for the feast to which they had been bidden; but to this feast Cuchulain did not go, although, of course, Fergus, as King's champion, went, and also Cathbad the Druid.

Arrived at the dūn of Felim Mac Dall, the royal party washed away the dust of the road from their persons and changed the garments of war, in which men always travelled in those troublous times, for the robes of ceremony; then they were conducted by their host's steward to the great hall.

This hall was lit by many torches.

At the high table sat Conor Mac Nessa the King, Felim Mac Dall, Cathbad the Druid, Fergus Mac Roy, and many other heroes of the Red Branch.

Before them the hospitable board groaned under its weight of good viands, joints of roasted meat, haunches of venison, piles of wheaten cakes, great flagons of mead and ale, and pitchers of strange wines from Greece.

At the lower board running lengthwise down the hall sat the King's soldiers and the retainers of Felim.

Now it so happened that at this time the wife of Felim was with child and her labour was upon her; as the party sat at meat a servant came hurrying from the women's apartments to tell her master that his wife was delivered of a daughter, so all that company rose and drank long life and prosperity, fair beauty, and great love to the new-born infant.

Jestingly the King bade Cathbad the Druid cast a horoscope for the little maid, and, the instruments of divination being fetched, this the aged man proceeded to do after the board had been cleared and the tables drawn to either side.

Long and earnestly the Druid studied the signs in the

sand upon the floor; raptly he gazed into the smoke arising from the sacred fire, wherein none but he might read; tensely the watchers stilled their breathing waiting for the word.

At last he spoke. "Of all women in Erin this little maid shall grow to be the fairest and best; in body and mind alike shall she be beautiful. In her mouth shall be soft and honeyed words, and in her heart no guile shall be found. Many men shall love her, but one only shall she love, and to him her love will cling always in fair weather and in foul; at long last she shall wed a King, yet in the tale I see much blood; the maid will be a pure and noble maid, yet, for her sake, shall the land run red and the last ruin fall upon the Province of Ulster."

Now when the rough and superstitious soldiers, aye, and not a few of the chieftains too, heard this saying, they murmured loudly that the child should be brought in and slain before them to arrest the doom words of the Druid.

In an instant Felim's sword flew clear of its scabbard, and like a lion guarding its litter of whelps, he stood snarling at them in front of the door at the back of the dais which led to the women's apartments, for though all Ulster crashed to ruin, yet should they never touch his little maid.

For a moment it seemed there would be bloodshed and battle within the hall of Felim Mac Dall.

But "Let be, let be," said the King; "put up the iron at thy sides. I myself will arrest the doom of which Cathbad speaks. If I read the prophecy aright it means that the maid shall wed some foreign King, and for her sake he shall attack and conquer Ulster. Now this is my judgement in the matter; the infant shall not die as ye wish, but after she has been taken to the Druid's Grove for the ceremony of naming, she shall be handed over to Levarcam, my old nurse, and by her be brought up in the dūn within the great forest between here and Emain Macha, from which it is my custom to hunt. When the maid is of a marriageable age I will myself espouse her, but meantime I make the stipulation that

none shall see her but Felim and his wife, Levarcam and myself. Say, Felim, and ye my comrades, does this my judgement please ye?"

Thus was the bloody strife avoided, and soon those who had so lately drawn their swords upon each other in fierce anger were drinking and singing together in the best of good comradeship.

The next day Felim and Conor talked long and earnestly about the future of the maid, whom the mother had decided to call Deirdre. Finally it was arranged that she should stay with her parents until her tenth birthday was celebrated and thereafter she should go to the forest dūn in charge of Levarcam until she was seventeen, when her marriage with King Conor should be celebrated.

So the matter was settled, and Felim begged his guest to stay with him and pass the days in hunting until the time for the naming of the child should arrive, for the host was anxious that Cathbad, the chief Druid of all Ulster, should conduct the ceremony, as was only fitting, for the maid was destined in future years to grace the Queen's throne and to be the first lady in the land.

Quickly the days passed; each morning the hunters would set out early to chase the beasts of venery or to slay the wolves which infested the province, sometimes on foot, sometimes on horseback; at other times they would go to the champaign country to fly their falcons at partridge and heron.

Soon the day of naming came round.

The King in robes of state proceeded at evening to the Sacred Grove through which he passed to the Doom Ring beyond, surrounded with its great pillars of stone, in the centre of which stood the Stone of Sacrifice overshadowed by a gnarled, gigantic oak tree. Here he took his seat, attended by his courtiers and chieftains, while the men-at-arms were drawn up without the pillars.

Presently the sound of sweet singing was heard, faintly at first, growing louder and louder as the singers advanced along the grove, and the wife of Felim came into sight, bearing the child and attended by a train of beautiful virgins clad in white and with unbound hair, who sang

sweetly as they came. By his wife strode Felim Mac-Dall in gorgeous apparel of green and gold.

As the circle of pillars was reached, the parents advanced straight across the centre to the Stone of Sacrifice, before which they knelt in humble devotion, while the maidens, separating to right and left as they passed the entrance, ranged themselves round the circle in front of the pillars, and ceased their singing.

Now all was silence, save for the warbling of a nightingale in a nearby thicket, for all waited for the coming of the Druids.

Presently the silence was broken, and adown the Grove came pacing the priests; first marched the lesser brethren, clad in long white flowing robes, chanting a deep bass invocation; after them followed one in saffron robes, who led the kid of sacrifice; and behind him was another who carried the sacred Sickle, and behind him again came two others in blood-red smocks reaching to the knee and belted in about the middle; these were the slaughterers, who carry the adze and Sacrificial Knife.

Last of all came Cathbad crowned with a chaplet of oak leaves, clothed in pale blue robes from head to foot, the large hanging sleeves of which were lined and turned back with soft white cloth; the skirt of the robe finished off with a deep hem of the same white material. About his neck was a golden chain, from which depended the insignia of his office, and in his hand was a stout oaken stave on which he leaned.

All the people rose and bowed their heads as the procession entered the doom ring, all except the parents, who remained humbly kneeling.

The priests then ranged themselves around the circle in front of the virgins, while the chief Druid, the slayers and the priests of the Sacrifice and Sickle walked on up to the Stone of Sacrifice, to the right and left and in front of which they took their stand.

And now everyone kneels while the Druid offers up a prayer for a blessing upon the ceremony; then the mother advances and lays the little child upon the stone between the horns,

"Is this child given unto the Light?" asks Cathbad.

"We give her willingly," respond Felim and his wife together. Whereon the priest with the adze advances and raises his implement on high prepared to strike.

"What shall be given in exchange for her life?" asks Cathbad.

"A young unblemished kid," respond the people.

The kid is led forward and held on high.

"Look well, oh people," chants the priest. "Is the offering good and without spot or blemish?"

"The offering is good," respond the men folk.

"The offering is without spot or blemish," sing the maidens.

Then he with the adze retires and he with the Sacrificial Knife advances, the offering is bound to the horns above the stone as the mother takes her little one to her breast again.

As the kid's throat is cut Cathbad advances and catches the blood in a golden basin. "The Sacrifice is consummated," he cries. "How shall she be named who lies before us in her innocence, who shall come again at wedlock and who shall lie upon the Stone at last in death?"

"Deirdre," reply the parents, and "Deirdre" cry the people with shouts of acclamation.

"So let it be," says the priest. "May the Light shine upon thee and nourish thee, may the Light give thee grace and beauty."

And now the blood of Sacrifice is poured out at the foot of the Sacred Oak, and the priests depart, followed by the King and all the people marching silently through the grove in the soft moonlight back to the dūn of Felim, where a great feast has been prepared in honour of the new-named maid.

Next morning, just as the dawn was breaking and the cattle were being driven forth to pasture in a cloud of golden dust, the King and his retinue bade their host good-bye and set off on their return journey to Emain Macha.

Arriving at his own dūn at sunset King Conor was met by the Boy Corps and gladly welcomed home.

After this, many weeks passed in the business of State and in attending to matters of husbandry, in which the King took a very keen interest.

As the weeks and months slipped by Cuchulain grew in beauty and manly strength until there was no man like unto him in all the King's company. The maids, aye and matrons, too, began to cast eyes of love and longing upon him and to encompass him about with windy sighs and languid glances, until the menfolk became jealous at the neglect they suffered, and in desperation besought him to take to himself a wife and so save all the bother. This he would not do, for as yet no woman found favour in his sight or filled a place in his mind, so he went to the King and asked permission to go on a long hunting expedition, stating that he wished to obtain some good skins to cure for the winter clothing, but in reality he wanted to get away and think quietly over his plans for the future.

The permission was readily granted, and two extra servants were offered to minister to his comfort, and to help to look after the horses; but this offer Cuchulain courteously refused, stating that Laeg could look after the horses and do anything for him that was really necessary, and for the rest he would look after himself. The two of them alone would travel faster, and any pelts they got could be cached and picked up again on the return journey.

All the next day was spent in making ready for the expedition; weapons, traps, and clothing were packed into the chariot, but very little food was taken, the travellers being content to rely upon their skill as hunters to fill their larder.

For many weeks they journeyed from place to place in their own province, killing their food as they went, and hiding any skins worth keeping, so that they could pick them up again later.

Very pleasant was this nomad life; hard at work in the open air all day, the long evenings spent by the

camp fire, when the sweet-scented smoke went up in straight spirals and the birds in a hundred bushes sang their evensong of thanksgiving; then to sleep in the open on a bed of springy bracken and soft moss with the heavens for canopy and the stars coming out one by one to peep curiously down upon the sleepers in the stillness of the woods; occasionally to turn and wake at the hooting of an owl or the barking of a fox, and then to sleep again until the first kiss of the sun should clear all dreams away.

Then as the sun began to warm the world and suck up the mists out of the valleys, to plunge into a shady pool or river reach, and to feel the blood go coursing madly through the veins at the first slap of the ice cold water. Oh! but it was a glorious life and one which Cuchulain and Laeg wished might last for ever, but before the former's eyes danced elusively the mystery of his parentage and the passionate desire for the days of action and wild fighting which should bring his Father to his side and make his identity known to him.

When the last week's hunting was almost finished and there remained only a few days more before they must commence the return journey to Emain Macha, Cuchulain decided that Laeg should remain in camp and rough-dress the week's kill, while he would saddle "the Grey of Macha" and ride out alone for a last day's hunting.

Slowly he rode out after the morning meal, letting many a good chance at a noble stag go by, keeping his two great deer hounds resolutely to heel as he rode along musing on the future and making his plans.

Soon, however, they started a great ten-tined stag; with a wild whoop Cuchulain laid his hounds on the trail and clapping in his spurs gave chase; through the woods they crashed, the horse picking his way cleverly in and out of the gnarled and twisted roots, the rider's face buried in the mane to save his head from the overhanging branches; then they burst out into the open, the quarry in sight and hounds running strongly, two or three hundred yards ahead just about to cross a stream; on they sweep, the river is reached and the

great horse gathers his legs under him and is over it with a mighty bound. Cuchulain sees the waters rush and swirl beneath him as they rocket through the air; on, on they sweep hour after hour over the heathery country, the rider firm in his saddle, sitting well down with hands held low on the reins, while the horse flings the miles behind him with his great raking strides. The future and the past are alike forgotten in the exhilaration of that glorious gallop, as over hill and dale they pass until at last, bounds run into their quarry and pull him down on the edge of a wood. Cuchulain leaps from his horse,—which stands with dilated nostrils, neck outstretched, and heaving, smoking sides. Drawing the knife from his girdle he gives the death stroke, and throwing some pieces to the hounds he cuts himself a steak, which he will cook before the “rigor mortis” sets in, for his dinner.

Going within the woods to search for kindling to build his cooking fire, Cuchulain was surprised to hear the sound of a woman’s voice raised in song at no great distance from him.

Stealthily he crept through the undergrowth, until the words of the song, interspersed by the splashing of water, could be distinctly heard.

In another moment he came to the banks of a wood-bound lake; resting his weight upon a jutting rock at the foot of which the waters lapped, he gently parted the overhanging branches and peeped out.

There, not fifty yards away from him, was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, sporting herself in the lake. Ruddy was the great coil of hair piled high upon her head, round and graceful were the curves of her figure as the sun flashed on the milky whiteness of her arms and shoulders, from which the water ran down as she tossed her hands aloft in playful delight; her cheeks were flushed with health and her full and sensitive mouth promised great joy of kisses.

Long Cuchulain gazed enraptured and then silently withdrew. What had happened to him? The blood throbbed in his temples, there was a curious fluttering

in his throat, as though his heart was striving to burst its way out, his mouth seemed parched as with great thirst, and he shook in all his limbs. Surely there was new brightness in the sunlight, surely the song of the birds was sweeter? all for the sight of a lovely young girl, in the perfection of her virgin beauty, playing in the pool, unconscious of the passionate watcher.

Quietly Cuchulain stole back to the spot where he had left horse and hound; bidding the latter lie down, he hobbled "the Grey of Macha," muffling the horse's head in his cloak lest it should neigh and so betray his presence.

Gone was all thought of the stiffening stag and his half-prepared dinner as he stole quietly back to the pool, and, peeping out, he observed the maid, now clothed, was about to depart, her hair of burning ruddy gold hanging down to her knees over the green smock-like gown in which she had clad herself.

Hastily Cuchulain skirted the pool and followed in her footsteps as she sauntered down a sylvan glade humming a little love ballad, stopping here and there to pluck the woodland flowers, which she was weaving into a chaplet for her ruddy locks.

Soon she left the shelter of the wood and emerged into a field, sloping up to a grim-looking fortress, surrounded by a palisade some six or seven feet high.

All this Cuchulain observed from the edge of the wood, for the country was quite strange to him and he would not risk a hostile reception until he should know more of the maid and her surroundings. Presently he saw her pass through the gate in the palisade, and then he heard a horn winded to call the retainers to their dinner; later in the afternoon he saw a great number of horses brought out upon the plain for exercise, and later still he observed the cattle being driven into the byres after the day's grazing.

Still he waited on, hoping for somebody to come through the wood who might tell him somewhat of his surroundings; just as the sun was sinking he heard the grunting and snuffling of pigs, followed by several hearty

whacks and squeals, and into view along the glade there came a herd of swine, being driven in from the woods where they had spent the day feeding on the mast and acorns.

As the swineherd came level with his hiding place, Cuchulain stepped out and motioned to the man that he wished to speak with him.

"Friend," said he, "tell me, who is the master of yonder dūn, what is his condition and family? for he seems to me to be a warmish man, having a large following and many flocks and herds."

"Of a truth, my master," replied the man, "thou must have travelled far from thy home if thou knowest not the village of Lusca and the dūn where Forgall the Wily lives with his two daughters, Emer and Fiall; but in sooth I should have put them the other way round, for Fiall is the elder of the twain, but Emer is the apple of her Father's eye, and is guarded day and night by doughty champions lest she should wed against his will, and before her Sister Fiall, as well she might, for although the elder is both good and beautiful, yet the younger has the six gifts of womanhood—chastity, beauty, song, needlework, wisdom, and a honey-sweet tongue." And now Cuchulain knew that the man spoke of the maiden he had seen bathing in the pool, and his heart sang within him for that she was neither mated nor betrothed and might yet be his.

So he stripped the gold bangle off his arm and gave it to the swineherd for his information, and made his way back through the wood to the animals. Having seen to the wants of the Grey, he lay down supperless, to go to sleep rolled in his cloak, for it was too late that night to make another kill; the stag was by this time set too stiff to eat with comfort, and to get back to his camp was out of the question in the rapidly growing darkness.

The first beams of the sun striking on his eyelids aroused him the next morning; at once he arose, fed the Grey, and strapped the deer on behind the saddle after having fed the hounds on some strips cut from the

carcase; his own hunger he somewhat appeased with some wheaten cakes he found in his saddle bag. He then started out on the return journey to Laeg, and, reaching the camp about mid-day, found that individual nearly frantic with anxiety at his master's long-continued absence.

To Laeg, however, Cuchulain told little of the real reason of his absence, merely saying as he unstrapped the carcase from behind his saddle that the chase had been long and stern, and he had been too tired to return overnight. He then casually added that he had now seen the maiden whom he intended to make his wife, and that they would go to the dūn of her Father on the morrow, and in the meantime he would be glad if Laeg would prepare him a meal instead of standing there staring like a fool.

Wonderingly the charioteer set about his task with many covert glances at his master, whom he had never seen in this mood before.

After a hearty meal, Cuchulain called to Laeg to get out the spare garments they had brought with them and to help him furbish up their arms and prepare the chariot against the morrow's visit; that night they went to rest full early, for Cuchulain would be up next day with the dawn, grooming the horses until their coats shone like silk and giving the final touches to his own accoutrements. Wonderingly and in silence, the usually loquacious Laeg observed all these preparations next morning, scratching his head from time to time as is the habit amongst grooms and charioteers the world over.

When all was arranged to Cuchulain's entire satisfaction, he dressed himself in the clothes of pride he had carried with him in case he should visit any great Chief's dūn in his wandering, and having given a final look at the get up of his charioteer told him to drive slowly on at a steady trot, in order to save the horses for a spirited and dashing arrival at the dūn of Forgall the Wily.

Steadily they journeyed on through the morning over the country Cuchulain had traversed so recently in pur-

suit of the noble stag; about noon they arrived at the wood, wherein was the bathing pool of Emer. There they halted for the mid-day meal, after which all signs of travel were washed away; skirting the wood, they came in sight of the dūn.

Instantly Cuchulain bade Laeg urge his horses to a furious gallop, and such was the thunder of their hoofs and so loud was the rumbling of the chariot as they charged across the sward, that the sound of it came to Emer and her sister Fiall as they sat within the palisades sewing with their handmaidens.

"Run, one of you, to the turret and see who comes on at such a pace," quoth Emer.

Immediately one of the girls ran lightly up the stairs and leant out over the battlements from whence she called down,

"A mighty chariot of war drawn by two fiery steeds, one grey and one black, comes to Dūn For gall; in it is a dark and handsome warrior, clothed in a scarlet cloak, who tosses up a great two-handed sword as the chariot dashes on; with him is a slim youth who handles his horses superbly, his ruddy hair is bound with an emerald fillet supporting golden ear pieces! Now the warrior begins to sing, and oh, his voice is as beautiful as his form is gracious."

Drawing up before the palisades, Cuchulain springs down from the chariot and advancing to the gate hammers loudly thereon with the hilt of his sword.

The gate is opened by the sentry, and in marches Cuchulain. Observing Emer, and recognising in her the maid of the pool, he walks straight up to her and bowing low announces: "I am Cuchulain of the Red Branch of Ulster, son of Dectera, daughter of Cathbad and Moya, who am come to pay honourable courtship for thy hand.

"Young am I, but not a deedless man; crafty in war, well dowered, and one to whom the King himself has granted the arms of manhood. Say maiden, wilt thou mate with me and call me lord?"

Then Emer makes reply.

"Softly, young Sir! for hardly may this be. Surely thy courtship should be paid to Fiall here, my sister, yet unwed; a good and noble maiden she, and one well skilled in housewifely tasks. Speak then to her, for first must she be wed 'ere ever I may look on man with eyes of love."

"Emer," answered Cuchulain, "of a truth thy sister is a comely maid and one whom many men may well desire! but I love thee alone and desire no other; fair is thy face and fairer still thy body, and mine shalt thou be."

"Sir! what dost thou know of my body?"

"All that thy mirror of the pool can shew thee."

Whereat the maid blushed rosily, half divining that he had surprised her at the bathing place, and now the love of him welled up within her breast, yet would she still deny him for very coquetry.

"Fair may my body be, yet none shall take it who hath not slain his hundreds and who is as yet unsung of skalds: My Father is a mighty man, terrible in his wrath, who holds a blood feud with thy house and line; begone quickly, 'ere he find thee out and slay thee in thy standing."

"Not so," replied Cuchulain, "I will see thy Father and ask thy hand of him."

Now Forgall was fetched; right bitterly he laughed and cruelly mocked at the young man when he heard his request.

"Thou to ask my daughter's hand in marriage, thou with all thy deeds to do; go thou to Skatha, if thou canst pass the Bridge of Leaps, and from her learn the use of arms; then when thou hast done some deeds of might, come back and take my daughter—if thou canst—I promise her to thee if thou canst win her from Dūn Forgall and the Lord of Lusca, thou beardless youngling! I have a mind to whip thee with rods from my door for thy presumption, but for this time go thou in peace and come not back if thou dost value thy tender hide. Out! Get thee gone!"

Now Cuchulain was white with rage to be thus flouted in the presence of all that company, yet he looked his

tormentor fairly in the face, and with flashing eye he quietly answered him.

"Ill hast thou entreated me, and evil spoken me, my Lord of Lusca; yet will I take thee at thy word. When I come back it shall be with fire and sword. Around thy head the walls of Dūn For gall shall crumble, and to thine own doorpost will I nail thine ears—a sign of Cuchulain's might! But see that thou dost not mate the maid 'ere I return, or I will stuff thy carcase with straw and hang thee from yonder battlements, a warning to all men of the fate of a foresworn foeman."

Then he turned him about, and just as he was ready to mount his chariot, Emer threw all caution to the winds and braved her Father's wrath.

"Oh, Cuchulain! bold is thy look and bolder still thy words, and thou hast stirred me to the core as no man ever before hath done. Go thou forth, do thy deeds, and then return to claim me, and now truly I think that I am fey, for it comes upon me that we two shall mate and love each other all our days; great love shall I give thee but no child, for thou shalt break thy vows and take another mate before I lie in thy arms in the quiet night watches; a son shall she give thee, but him shalt thou slay in expiation of thy sin."

Fiercely Cuchulain swears his love and faith, and yet as he starts out on the long journey to Emain Macha he is very silent, for his spirit is weighed down with a grave premonition of evil days to come, nor can the cheery talk of Laeg arouse him.

Hour after hour they drive steadily on until night overtakes them and they camp by the way.

CHAPTER V

ARRIVED at Emain Macha, Cuchulain went straight to his Mother's bower and told her all that had happened to him. At first she did her very best to dissuade him from setting out in search of Skatha, but finding his purpose fixed, she advised him to consult Fergus Mac Roy, who had himself received his early training in arms from Skatha, and would therefore be able to tell him what he should do if he would come to the Land of Shadows where she lived.

Fergus on being consulted told Cuchulain that Skatha was the mightiest woman warrior, with the possible exception of Aifa, in all the world, and of the true Amazonian type.

"Listen carefully, Cuchulain," said he; "something of Skatha I have already told thee! A good and gracious woman is she, having a greater knowledge of the practise of arms than anyone else in the Universe; moreover, she is a kind and loyal friend to those she loves, but a perfect fury if her anger is roused. To an apt pupil she will teach all that she knows; but to one who is lazy or a coward she will shew no mercy, setting him many difficult tasks speedily to encompass his end and thus rid herself of a tiresome charge.

"Her greatest ambition is to find one sufficiently brave and intelligent to whom she may give the Gae Bolg—a weapon about which thou wilt learn if ever thou shouldst come to the Land of Shadows;—for many years I strove to attain this honour, but alas it was not for me."

Fergus sighed deeply, and then continued, "On this side of a dreadful chasm, which may only be crossed by the Bridge of the Leaps, thou wilt find many noble youths whom she instructs. They remain on this side of the chasm, because the last two feats which Skatha teaches are the Heroes' Salmon Leap, by which the

Bridge is crossed, and the use of the Gae Bolg, of which I have already spoken."

"Ah, well," said Cuchulain, interrupting the narrative, "it is evident that my task is to be doubly difficult from the outset, for it seems to me that Forgall, well named the Wily, has put me under geise to cross the Bridge before I commence my instructions from Skatha!"

"That is serious," said Fergus, "for it is usually the last feat she teaches; still thou canst but do thy best."

"Now to come to the Dûn of Skatha, thou must first cross the Seas to the Isle of Skye, then thou must go by way of dense forest paths, until a great tract of desert land, in which is to be found but little water, is reached; after this is traversed, thou wilt come to the swamps which are named 'The Plains of Ill Luck,' and how thou art to pass over this Plain is more than I can say, for it seems that thou art determined to set off at once, and as Skatha has not accepted thee as a pupil, no guide will be sent to pilot thee across; if, however, it is vouchsafed that the way be made clear to thee, thou shalt arrive at a beast infested glen, wherein will be found much work for thy spear and blade. This peril once passed in safety, then thy journey is almost ended, for the Bridge of Leaps will have been reached. And now I have told thee all the perils of the way, say, Cuchulain! were it not wise for thee to wait six months until the next draft of young warriors starts out in a body for the Land of Shadows?"

Cuchulain thanked Fergus courteously for his instructions and advice, stored up the former in his memory, but refused to take the latter, for with the beauty of Emer ever before him he was all on fire to be away on his journey, feeling that the sooner he started the sooner he would be back, and the sooner he was back the sooner he might win her for his own, and take his just revenge upon Forgall for the affront he had put upon him.

And now a month passed in making ready for the journey. First the King's permission had to be obtained, and this was easy, for nothing was ever denied to

Cuchulain by Connor Mac Nessa; then a long dragon of war had to be found, manned and provisioned for the voyage, and lastly arrangements had to be made for the disposal of Laeg and the chariot and horses, while he was away, and these latter he left in the charge of his friend Follaman, Commander of the Boy Corps of Emain Macha.

At last the time for his departure came round, the last farewell was spoken, and the weary day of leave-taking had drawn to a close. On the morning of the morrow Laeg sadly harnessed the horses to the chariot and drove his beloved master to the coast, where he embarked aboard the ship which wore out to sea just as the sun was sinking in crimson splendour in the West.

Of what passed during the voyage Cuchulain knew nothing, for he was very sick; indeed he was most heartily thankful when at last the coastline hove in sight and he was able to plant his feet on firm ground once more.

As he said to the grim old sea dog who captained the boat, "The sea was all very well for those who liked it, well was it to sing about also, but for him he preferred the dry land where at least a man was master of his own legs."

That night he rested at a little fishing village, feeling very lonely and sad without Laeg, from whom he had never before been separated since the day of the latter's capture. The next morning he purchased a sturdy cob and commenced his perilous journey in earnest.

Mile after mile he travelled inland over gradually rising ground until a faint blue haze on the sky line, growing plainer every minute, led him to believe that he was approaching the forests of which Fergus had spoken. When the dense growth of timber was fairly in view he decided to off-saddle, preferring to pass the night in the open rather than to trust himself within the doubtful shelter of the trees.

At the breaking of the day Cuchulain awoke to see the heralds of the dawn wing out, the light reflected from pinion and breast as they flew forth across the sky from peak to peak, from sea to woodland, summoning the world to live again after its brief annihilation in sleep;

waking the people to joy or sorrow, to work or ease, leading them yet one step nearer to the Great Abyss, into which we all must pass.

With such thoughts stirring dimly and but half realised in his breast he saddled his horse and, eating of his scanty fare as he rode, passed sadly from the sunlight into the shadow of the trees, travelling slowly down a narrow ride between great trunks like the majestic aisle of some vast cathedral; no birds sang in the sombre density of this great wood, his horse's feet made no sound on the carpet of thickly strewn pine needles, only the murmur of the wind in the tree tops came to his ears like the whisperings of the souls of the forgotten dead.

Moodily he mused on his future, wondering almost hopelessly as he passed what chance he had of reaching the Dún of Skatha alone and unaided; almost he wished he had taken the advice of Fergus and waited for the marching of the new draft, for, as is so often the case, that which had held no terrors in the secure peace of home loomed very large and terrible now he was far away in the awful silence of this dense forest. Even the horse seemed to feel the saddening influence of his surroundings, and, suiting his gait to the rider's mood, paced dejectedly along with head down-hung.

Realising presently that at this pace he would never get out of the wood by nightfall, Cuchulain shook the reins and with an exclamation of "C'up horse," trotted briskly forward, even trying to lighten the way by troling forth a song, but so overpowering was the influence of his surroundings that soon the song trailed off into silence, and once again the black mood swept down upon him.

In this way some ten miles were traversed before he halted to feed his horse and eat his own mid-day meal, after which he again trotted forward and then, judging from the ever-growing darkness that evening was approaching, he put his horse to a sharp canter and, just as the sun was sinking, emerged on the far side of the wood with a heartfelt sigh of thankfulness at being free of its depressing influence at last.

In front of him was a lovely stretch of greensward,

sloping down to a swiftly running stream, and beyond that again a thin belt of trees, which were yet thick enough to obscure the view of the country beyond. On the banks of the stream he decided to camp for the night; having taken the saddle and bridle off the horse he allowed him to roll and to crop the luscious grass. Stripping off his clothes, Cuchulain plunged into the stream; there—after feeling much refreshed, he ate his supper, and finally rolling himself in his cloak he went to sleep.

Next morning he awoke, bathed and fed, groomed his horse, and riding forward across the stream he passed through the belt of trees out into the open country beyond, and now a wide open panorama was spread out before him; for miles grassland, to delight the heart of the hunter, rolled away, lavishly besprent with flowers, which lent a pleasant dash of colour to the scene; here and there were dotted clumps of trees and belts of scrub, in the middle distance there shewed an outcrop of rock rising some hundreds of feet into the air, beneath which nestled a farmstead, or dwelling of some kind; beyond this so far as the eye could see, right up to the horizon, stretched what looked from that distance like arable land.

After the dense gloom of the forest through which he had so recently passed, the sight of this glorious open country was sheer delight to the traveller.

With a joyous whoop, Cuchulain clapped his heels into his horse's sides and sent him forward at a rattling gallop over the turf, then remembering he had yet many miles to traverse he eased him to the hand canter which eats up mile after mile, tireless and untiring.

Now indeed could Cuchulain sing; all the doubts and sorrows of yesterday were thrown aside, the future seemed bright with promise and filled with hope; so easily do we lay away one mood and replace it with another as our environment changes for better or worse. True it is that the day may come when we are so hardened and embittered by the cruel buffetings of Fate that, no matter how beautiful our surroundings, we remain sceptical and

sad; or it may be that some great sorrow has irretrievably saddened our lives, and do what we will we cannot get free of the misery in our hearts, which, like a horrid canker, eats away the joy of living; yet, thank God, there are few men in the world who cannot truly return thanks to their Maker that they are alive on such a day as that on which Cuchulain galloped over the springy turf from the wood of dull care, nor was he of the number of misanthropes; as yet no great sorrow had come into his life, nor was he, in spite of his fits of sullen brooding, of anything but a sunny nature.

He watched his shadow, long in front of him when he started, gradually shorten up under him and disappear as the sun beat down from overhead, and then as the day went on stretch away behind.

Hour after hour the hill rose up into clearer view as he approached it, until at last the farmstead at the base of it was reached. Very curious was the formation of this hill, and quite worthy of a special description.

About a mile long at the base by half a mile wide, it mounted sheer into the air for some four or five hundred feet without break or foothold, composed of a dull rocky substance, with great streaks of shining black stone, relieved with green and blood red veins. The topmost rock was shaped like the head of a boar, and from between the eyes welled out a stream of clear water, which divided on either side of the snout and ran down the face of the cliff in two cascades. The whole mass was absolutely devoid of vegetation, and as Cuchulain afterwards learned, no birds ever settled thereon.

For some time he sat quite still in his saddle, gazing intently at this strange phenomenon until he was aroused from his reverie by people running out from the farmhouse to discover who the horseman might be who sat and gazed so quietly at the rock, which, of course, had no unusual features to those who lived beneath its shadow and gazed upon it day by day.

Eagerly the young people questioned him as to who he was, whence he came, and what was the object of his journeying, until Cuchulain was like to be fairly mazed by

the ceaseless rain of their questioning; just then, however, the farmer himself appeared and put a period to the inquisition, saying, "Gently, gently, my children, yonder gentleman is perhaps aweary with much travel, all in his own good time he will doubtless tell us his story, if it pleases him so to do; if not, then let him go on his way refreshed and rested, the hospitality of the House of the Rock is at his service just the same."

Thus saying the old man invited Cuchulain to dismount, and bade one of his sons lead away the tired horse and feed and stable him comfortably.

The farmer was a very aged man, clad in rough homespun kilt and upper garment, over which was cast a thick woollen cloak to keep out the chilly evening air; he was a fine-looking old man, stoutly built and standing well over six feet in height, with a snowy beard so long that the ends of it hung down almost to his knees, he had a large straight nose, over which flashed a pair of piercing grey eyes keen as a hawk's; what little of his cheeks his beard allowed to be seen were red and wizened, like a year-old apple long forgotten in the straw of the fruit loft, while his countenance was instinct with jollity and good comradeship.

"Thou wilt lie here this night, stranger?" he queried, adding, "right glad shall we be of thy company, who have but few visitors to our outland home."

Thus saying he led the way into the "house-place" of the farm. The door, made out of one solid block of wood and hung upon leathern hinges, creaked noisily under his hand as he pulled it open; within, the room glowed ruddily in the light from a cheery fire of logs crackling upon the hearthstone, beside which mugs of ale were set to warm, for it was late summer and the evenings began to be chilly; above the fireplace the wall bulged out, making a hood under which the family could sit in winter time telling tales around the fire, and on this wall hung two great boar spears crossed, down the centre of the room was a massy oak beam supporting the roof, up to which the smoke-blackened rafters sloped steeply from the walls, supported here and

there by gnarled and twisted beams, rough and almost untrimmed, just as they had been lopped from the parent tree. Around the walls were many trophies of the chase and many a weapon of war.

Upon the floor of beaten earth were cast the rough pelts of wolves, and in the centre stood the table spread for the evening meal.

As the farmer and his guest entered the room, two great wolfhounds rose up from before the fire growling fiercely, their hackles bristling at the sight of a stranger; at a word from their master they sank down again, quiet, save for an occasional rumbling growl when Cuchulain shifted his position on the settle whereto his host had led him.

Presently the farmer's sons and daughters came in one by one, and drew up round the board for supper; the meal being disposed of the men folk, taking their mugs of ale with them, assembled round the fire and began to talk of this and that in desultory fashion. Presently the women joined them.

Cuchulain, seeing that they were only making conversation, while, in reality, anxiously waiting for him to tell them something of himself and of his journey, began to tell them all that tale of his wanderings and of how he was journeying to the home of Skatha to gain his final proficiency in the profession of arms.

Quietly they listened to him until all the tale was told and he had again taken up his mug to quench the thirst engendered by so much talking, and then the old man spoke.

"My son! of the difficulties of thy journey and of the perils of the path I know only too well, for until the last four years, during which my limbs have grown weary with age, it was I who was wont to guide Skatha's pupils to Skatha's dūn from this great rock, at which we found thee gazing with such wonder.

"I think thou hast done wrong in not following the advice of Fergus to await the draft, for hardly mayest thou, all unaccompanied as thou art, overcome the dangers to be met, nor do I think that thou wilt win

to the Bridge of the Leaps unguided. Still it may be! for thou hast a brave and noble look and certainly thou dost not lack courage, else would'st never have attempted the journey at all. But how thou wilt come through the Plain of Ill Luck, which is nothing more nor less than a great shaking bog—a death-trap to those who do not know the secret of the paths—is more than I can say. Perhaps I can advise thee how to start, but thereafter thou must feel thy way foot by foot with the butt of thy spear, and that is like to be a long business, so that it well may be that thou shalt starve in the swamps if thou dost not die of thirst in the desert land beyond the rock.”

Then spake the eldest son.

“Young Sir! of the land beyond the desert I know naught, but the desert I know well, for I have crossed it; three days did it take me on a swift, enduring horse, no food was there for man nor beast, nor water either; therefore this is my word to thee. Stay here a day or twain, and then set out again upon the wayfaring, well provisioned and carrying plenty of water, when thy horse is well rested from the journey he has already done.”

“Aye! So say I, too,” added the farmer; “stay here and right welcome! Thus mayest thou finish yet another stage of journeying, and perchance come to the end of thy wanderings with the life still whole in thy body.”

So Cuchulain was bound to curb his impatience, and for the next few days he stayed at the farm, hearing strange tales of the land through which he must soon pass, and stranger tales of adventure from the days when the old farmer had piloted other pupils across the Plains of Ill Luck and through the Perilous Glen.

Fergus, the old man remembered well, and many another famous warrior besides; right eagerly he questioned Cuchulain as to their doings out in the great world, far beyond the ken of his peaceful home life; gladly the young man answered him, delighting his host with stirring tales of the hero-acts of those he had known in their far off youth, when, to him, the world was young and the blood of Life's springtime coursed wildly in his veins.

Thus Cuchulain rested, regaining his strength and taking his good horse out for exercise each day until his vigour came back to him and they were ready to proceed on their way to the land of mystery beyond the desert.

On the last night of his stay at the farmstead Cuchulain sat with his host by the fire carefully noting every detail of his future journeying and the advice the old man offered.

CHAPTER VI

WITHIN an hour of the dawn wind rustling the leaves against the roof thatch, Cuchulain was astir, rising early to prepare his horse against the journey.

Imagine then his surprise on going out to the byre where the horse was stabled, to find the farmer's eldest son just putting the finishing touches to the grooming; when it was done they returned to the homestead together and discovered the farmer packing up a sack of fodder to strap behind the saddle, and the farmer's wife filling a wallet with provision to stay Cuchulain on his way, while close behind lay a skin well filled with wine which he must also carry.

This kindly thoughtfulness for his comfort stirred Cuchulain deeply, and most earnestly he thanked them, pressing upon his host a bulky purse of gold, but this the old man would in no wise accept, saying that he found great joy in furthering the enterprise of so grand a pupil to Skatha, and all the reward he craved was that his guest would mention the old guide to his erstwhile mistress.

Then they breakfasted heartily off great rounds of beef and steaming venison pasties, washed down with mighty draughts of home-brewed ale.

When the meal was over the son went forth to saddle the horses, proposing to set Cuchulain a day's journey on his way through the desert lands; for this first stage it was decided that the farm horse should carry all the provisions, wine and water skins, so that the other animal might remain fresh for his longer travel. Soon all was arranged, and the riders sprang to saddle, Cuchulain's steed indulging in two or three lusty bucks when his master was firmly settled, to prove that he was fit as hands and good corn could make him for the task before him.

So amid shouts of farewell from the men and waving

of kerchiefs by the women folk, they rode out and crossed the shoulder of the hill into the great unknown as the sun was mounting high in the heavens, winking back in joyous flashes from the burnished splendour of Cuchulain's accoutrements.

On they rode, on and on hour after hour, at that loping canter which eats up the vanishing miles of space, until they halted in late afternoon to eat their first repast, and now one goes on and one goes back, for henceforth Cuchulain must journey alone till he wins by devious ways to the Dūn of Skatha.

Sadly the farmer's son transfers his load to Cuchulain's horse and, after a hearty farewell, watches until the figure of the young man has vanished over the horizon. Then, with a sigh, he turns his steed homeward, bitterly regretting in his heart that by reason of his humble birth, he too may not face the great world and win honour by deeds of bravery and daring, yet firmly resolving to follow in some great lord's fighting tail if opportunity but serve.

Cuchulain, too, is somewhat sad as he journeys on mile after mile in the desolate and all-engulfing loneliness of those drearily silent plains. There is no sound of bird or beast to cheer his way; even the hoof-beats of his steed are dulled in the sand, and the only break in the monotony is the creaking of saddle leather against warm flesh or an occasional metallic ring as the tip of the sword scabbard strikes against spear butt or stirrup iron.

In this way the first and second days' journeying are passed, without incident, and though it is mightily depressing the rider does not grumble, for he knows that one more day in the dreary waste will bring him to the Plain of Ill Luck, and mean yet another stage accomplished in his self-sought task, and so he is rather inclined to congratulate himself on the success of his efforts; but "softly, my friend! That fickle jade, Dame Fortune, does not always smile, and may yet try a fall to test thy mettle."

And so it comes to pass that Cuchulain, over anxious to be upon his way, rides forward next day before it is light and quickly reaps the reward of his folly, for the

good horse cantering on puts his foot into a hole and comes crashing to ground with a scream of agony; Cuchulain rolls clear as he falls, and quickly springing to his feet, finds that the water skin has burst and the horse has smashed his fetlock.

Sadly he gazes upon his fallen steed, the sorrow welling up in his warm Celtic heart, for full well he knows that never again will the good animal gallop out over the springy turf or buck beneath a rider to shew his mettle; for him all days are done and the last joy of hot, pulsing blood in the maddened chase is past; pitifully the pain-dimmed eyes of the horse are turned upon the master whose haste has brought this woe upon him.

Inevitably Cuchulain knows that he must free the spirit from its pain and so, stooping to pat the faithful servant of his will, he flings his cloak before the eyes to hide the glint of the merciful steel, and drawing his hunting-knife plunges it firmly in the horse's throat, ridding him of his pain and letting the warm blood gush out in a red stream, which is quickly sucked up by the thirsty sands.

Well! it is over, and now he must set to work to load himself with the provision wallet and wine skin before he continues his journey on foot.

Better had it been for him had the wine skin burst and that containing the water been left intact, for when the great thirst comes every drop of that liquid will be precious as minted gold, and when the throat is parched and the senses reeling madness follows swiftly on the drinking of wine or spirit.

Stolidly he tramps on, the sand clogging his feet at every step; the end of the third day finds him still in the desert, instead of well clear of it as he had hoped, and so he sits down on the sand with no means of making a bivouac after his long and dusty tramp; he is hungry and thirsty, but the crumbs of the oaten cake stick in his throat, and the wine with which he tries to wash them down turns his blood to fire, until at last he gives it up, and rolling himself in his cloak he dozes and tries to forget his troubles in sleep, but sleep will not

come; his eyes prick and his feet are sore and swollen, so that he tosses from side to side, vainly cursing the drowsy Goddess. At last he falls into a fitful slumber, only to spring up in a few minutes with a violent start, thinking he hears again his horse's dying scream; crossly he lies down and drops off again, dreaming he sees Emer in the pool coming to him with a silver goblet of crystal clear water to slake his thirst, and wakes to take it from her gentle hands, but only finds himself alone in the pitiless silence of the waste.

There the dawn finds him wakeful, hollow-eyed and unrested. He cannot eat and dare not drink the wine, for madness lies that way, and so he gets wearily to his feet and pushes on, suffering agonies as the sun mounts up and up, beating with implacable fury on his undefended frame.

On he goes with starting eyeballs and thirst-blackened tongue lolling out, feeling that a band of red hot steel encircles his brow, until he stumbles, and with a gasping, croaking cry, "I can no more, Emer farewell!" he sinks to the ground, prepared stoically to await the end. Gradually his senses reel and leave him, confused babblings come from his lips till he lies quiescent, close to the bosom of the great Mother Earth from whom we came and to whom we shall return at the last.

Vainly he murmurs to the All-Father. "Is this the end or but the torpor stealing on which heralds the great disillusionment?" and so sinks to oblivion.

But all is not yet over. Rising mysteriously and seeming to gather his being from the Sun's rays comes a man of glorious and radiant countenance, perfect of form and lordly in his bearing.

With loving Father gaze he looks upon the exhausted youth, noting with eyes of pride the beauteous symmetry of the drooping figure, then stooping swiftly he pillows the heavy head within the crook of his arm and moistens the lips again and yet again from a little flask he carries.

Slowly the spirit awakens, and shudder upon shudder passes through the all-spent body; at last the eyelids quiver and open, then Cuchulain realises that aid has

come to him in his direst hour of need and he is alone no longer; he would start up upon his feet, but his rescuer presses him firmly back, saying: "Sleep my son! I will watch over thee and help thee on thy journey when thou art fully rested."

And so Cuchulain sleeps, and the wondrous stranger with the visage of light departs, but soon returns, bearing easily upon his back a large wheel, encircled by a flaming edge which shoots forth rays, hot as the sun at noon. This he places on the ground and carefully covers with his cloak, thereafter sitting quietly by the side of the sleeping boy, musing upon strange matters. Who shall say what his thoughts are, who he is or from whence he comes; and yet Cuchulain turning in his sleep takes the strange man's hand and murmurs happily in his sleep like a baby cradled on its mother's bosom.

For hour after hour he sleeps the sleep of utter prostration and all the while the stranger stays beside him sheltering him with his own body, never moving, neither eating nor drinking, but simply sitting there still as a graven image.

At last, as late afternoon was drawing to the shades of evening, the youth awakened, and being given food and drink was once again thoroughly refreshed; but now his curiosity was aroused and he questioned the stranger eagerly as to who he was, whither he had travelled and how came he there with never a steed to bear him.

The stranger smiled indulgently at all this rain of questions, then made reply in a sweet, strong voice:

"Cuchulain—yes, thy name is known to me—my name I may not tell thee—yet, nor whence I come; suffice it for the present that I came by a path that even thou mayest not tread, but surely my voice is familiar to thy ear? for I have spoken once before to thee. Ah! by thy look it is plain that the memory has passed, but think of thy first fight, when, through all the battle fury, a voice spoke, bidding thee spare the young charioteer who lay beneath thy dripping blade."

"Was it indeed thy voice that spoke to me then, my dear lord?" asked Cuchulain. "Wilt thou not tell me

who thou art who hast so strangely come to succour me, for greatly am I drawn to thee, and gladly would I know thy name that I may think of thee in times to come."

"Nay, my son, I may say no more save this, once more shall we meet before you tread the rainbow bridge of doom, and then, in the hour of thy greatest need, will many things be made plain which now are shrouded in mystery. Now sleep, and in the morning shalt thou start once more on thy wanderings to the land of Skatha."

As the stranger finished speaking Cuchulain turned away his eyes to gaze upon the sunset. On the horizon the sky was flooding to crimson splendour 'neath the high hung velvet pall of night, finally turning slowly to faintest primrose as star after star peeped out in silvery radiance. Cuchulain's mind was charged with strange thoughts as he lay down to sleep. Then the quiet dark crept down and all the world slept, hushed quiet on the tender breast of old Mother Nature.

Dreamless and peaceful was the wanderer's rest that night as he lay with limbs relaxed and head pillowed on cross flung arm, the stranger brooding near him, until he too slept in the all-encircling silence beneath the tranquil sky.

The soulful calling and whistling of a plover awakened them next morning as the dawn was breaking and all the wastelands lay swathed in purple mist, against which Cuchulain's up-struck spear shewed black in hard outline.

Lazily they stretched and yawned in the first flood of returning consciousness.

Like water poured flashing from a river, light began to spread over the plain; dimly mystic clouds, rose-tinted, gathered and spread over the horizon, and then the fingers of the dawn shot out across the sky. Cuchulain shuddered in that revulsion of feeling which follows close upon the awakening of the soul from slumber.

"Half had I expected to find thee gone, Sir Stranger," cried Cuchulain, "deeming thee but a phantom of my brain conjured up to torment me in the hour of dissolution."

Laughingly the stranger bade him rise and eat, for he

must be early on his way if he would reach the end of the desolate lands by nightfall.

After the frugal meal was over, the stranger drew his cloak from the glittering wheel at which Cuchulain looked askance.

“ My son, take thou this wheel, and on thy journeyings, roll it before thee; it shall be thy guide to the edge of the desert and on through the Plains of Ill Luck; it shall dry thy path from thence through the Perilous Glen, but over the Bridge of Leaps must thy way be won alone.”

Eagerly does Cuchulain bend to examine the mystic fairy wheel which is to be his guide; then, turning to thank his friend for the gift, he finds himself alone, but looking up, he thinks he sees a form flashing aloft on the path of a sunbeam. So the mysterious visitant passes.

Strapping on his sword and buckler, Cuchulain takes up his javelin and bundles, sets the wheel rolling and follows in its path. Thus does he journey throughout the day, halting now and then to eat some food; towards evening trees begin to appear above the horizon on the swelling uplands he is approaching; right glad is he to rest at last beneath their shade on the banks of a pleasant river. When he has so rested awhile and prepared his bivouac he strips off his clothes and plunges into the water, which soothes his aching limbs, and quickly serves to wash away the dust and stains of the long day's march.

After the bath follows the evening meal, and then Cuchulain looks about him for the first time in the rapidly fading twilight.

In the beauty of his present surroundings, the fatigues of the desert past, and the terrors of the Perilous Glen to come, are almost forgotten. It seems that the gods, knowing the weakness of mortal flesh and the arduous nature of the journey, have provided this delightful spot for the recuperation of weary travellers.

Breaking off the desert at the edge of the foothills is first the scanty sedge grass, advance outpost of a fuller cultivation, then low bushes fringing the river's brink beyond which is a belt of pine trees, whose thick strewn spines should surely provide an easy couch for weary

limbs. First slipping on his sword belt, Cuchulain strolls leisurely on, and coming out from the shadow of the trees a most beautiful prospect breaks upon his gaze. Sloping gently away from the edge of the wood is a verdant terraced hollow, on whose sides grow mountain ash and silver birch shimmering in the setting sun. Nooks and bowers are formed at every turn by overhanging branch and encircling bush, while mossy grass promises soft repose to the tired traveller. On the north sides of the hollow the ground rises so steeply that nothing can be seen of the country immediately beyond, over which a curtain of turgid vapour appears to hang. Yet further on, in the middle distance, the glory of the quiet hills starts up, range upon range of purple splendour in the gathering dusk, relieved here and there by flashes of light as the last rays of the setting sun are reflected back from occasional outcrops of ore.

Having made a thorough inspection of the hollow, at the bottom of which was a small pool fed from a spring gushing out of the rock some ten feet above ground level, Cuchulain decided to shift his bivouac and to spend the night in one of the sheltered nooks which abounded; it was not a long task to fetch his scanty provisions from the river bank where he had first thought to make his camp, and place them in a spot where the foliage would protect him from the falling dew.

For a time he wandered round the dell and then sat down in his bower listening to the harmonious twitterings and rustlings of the birds as they ruffled their feathers and settled themselves in the branches for the night.

Finally he wrapped himself in his cloak, and pillowing his head upon his arm, he slept. He awoke suddenly, to hear the dawn wind whispering in the trees and to find the upper edges of the dell visible in the coming light, though all around him was still in darkness, while from the pond near by, a frog croaked eerily.

Like wine poured into a goblet, light filled the dell, piercing the armour of night, dispelling the shadows in the hollows, awakening all the world of nature to resonant life.

Directly the sun had warmed the world, Cuchulain betook himself to the river to swim and wash away the vapours of night; then after breakfast, he furbished up his arms, crossed the hollow, climbed the steep north side and then he looked down upon a most dreary sight—"The Plains of Ill Luck"—miles and miles of shuddering bog only broken by brilliant green patches which told of stagnant pools, slime coated or comparatively solid ground—hard would it be for the traveller to tell which until his foot had pressed it—and deep choking pools of mud surrounded by thick rushes, while over all hung a poisonous miasma. The general impression of desolation was emphasized by the continuous croaking of frogs and the uncanny crying of aquatic birds—teal, coote, cranes and geese—which abounded in vast numbers, rising in clouds on whirring wings as some monster dwelling in the quagmire disturbed them.

So dreary was the sight to Cuchulain, who had not yet recovered his vigour after the great trial of endurance that he had so recently undergone, that he turned back to his sheltered hollow with a sigh of relief at its sylvan peace and beauty.

There he rested for many days, provisioning himself upon the wild fowl which passed over his hollow to and from their feeding ground night and morning; one or more of these he was able to bring down with a stone from his sling, while for drinking, he had a plentiful supply of crystal clear water from the spring which welled out from the rock to feed the pool at the bottom of the hollow.

Feeling his strength come back to him, and knowing that it was high time to commence the next stage of his journey, Cuchulain started early one morning and descended the hill upon the other side of the lip of the hollow until he came to the edge of the Plains of Ill Luck.

Right and left he quested for a path, but no signs of firm foothold could he find within many yards of the outer edge. Now he bethought him of the flaming wheel, which all this time had been wrapped in his spare cloak; he unwrapped it and, standing it on edge, finally trundled it gently into the quagmire, not, however, without some

misgivings and the fear that it would instantly sink and be lost to sight for ever.

Immediately the edge of the wheel encountered the wet and slimy surface, the ring began to flame again and gave out a great heat, so that the path over which it travelled dried up and Cuchulain was able to follow after without the least trepidation.

On he marched through the bog along the path the flaming wheel provided, until he reached a rising knoll of solid ground just as the sun was sinking in crimson splendour, and the rim of the wheel, beginning to lose its sun-borrowed radiance and heat, gave warning that the day's journeying was over.

No sheltered seclusion of leafy bower was the wanderer's lot that night; indeed, he was lucky to gather dry rushes from the edge of the morass wherewith to light a fire, beside which he crouched, a lonely being in all that watery waste, listening to the insistent croaking of the frogs and the booming of a bittern close at hand.

In such a fearsome spot as this, with nought but noisome slime around, the only sound of life the squelching sluggard movements of some slimy reptile, better left unheard, evil thoughts beset the best of minds. Nor did the rising of the moon to gleam wanly over the iridescent mud improve the prospect. Then, for the first time in his life, did Cuchulain feel the chill fingers of fear clutching at his heart.

Thoughts of the dangers he had gone through, with still worse tales of the horrible beasts he must overcome or pass by stealth in Perilous Glen, arose to wrack and torment his mind. Deeper and deeper sank his spirits, blacker and more fearful grew his mood, until the cold deathlike touch of a snake slithering across the hand on which he rested, sent him staggering to his feet screaming like an over-wrought girl.

No man may say how, in that dread and horrid morass, the knoll on which Cuchulain rested had remained unsubmerged, but there it stood, grim and ghastly as the festering skull of a felon at the foot of a gallows, while from the centre of it there uprose a barren, dreary tree,

the indecent nakedness of its limbs clad only by a covering of pungent, evil-smelling leaves.

Against its trunk Cuchulain leaned his back, though overhead the branches stirred with a myriad hungry rustlings and suckings.

The scream with which he started up set Horror horn-headed loose upon the night; each noisome leaf upon the branches took flight and screamed; from the topmost bough of all rose up what seemed to be the ancient father of all sin, with taloned wings and glaring, glassy eyes—a vampire bat—his satellites a thousand little bats of ill repute who looked so much like fluttering leaves—flapped death-omened wings in poor Cuchulain's face, then flew away.

Left to himself, the wanderer gathered his courage to prepare for sleep. First he hollowed out a shallow trench wherein to lie, and in it scattered the glowing embers of his fire to warm the earth. Next he raked out the dead ashes before strewing down the rushes on which he spread his thick fleece cloak, and finally lay down, wrapping the garment close about him. The last thing to meet his still affrighted gaze was a wrack of black-bellied clouds pregnant with coming storm driving furiously across the moon.

Cuchulain had not been asleep an hour before the storm broke; it was as though the flood gates of heaven had been opened, the rain drove down in sheets, but this did not wake him, for he lay warm and dry within his cloak, one corner of it flung across his head. But, as those can tell who have slept in the open under similar conditions, it is stupefying to sleep long tightly wrapped in a garment which restricts the free use of the limbs and with one's head covered, so presently Cuchulain turned on his back, flinging the covering from his face to gain an easier position, only to be awakened to his misery by the great drippings from the branches overhead falling, with what seemed a stunning force, upon his eyelids.

Feeling suffocated, oppressed, and parched with thirst, he rose, but the moment the shelter of the cloak was left, the driving rain wet him through to the bone.

Soaked and miserable, he gazed around him in the

gloom to ascertain whence came the horrible suckings which assailed his ear, such suckings as one imagines may be heard in the depths of the sea, when the blind, dead-white sea serpent heaves himself up from his bed upon the ultimate slime.

An awful sight confronted him, for the morass, swelled by the falling rain, was rising—rising, already the black ooze lapped about the rocks a score of yards above the point that yesternight had masked the edge of the dry land which formed the knoll, and the slimy mire was rising, ever rising, keeping time to the falling rain.

Before the inexorable pressure of the liquid mud, played a light rush of stagnant surface water, which lapped about Cuchulain's feet, numbing him to the knees with its icy touch. Fascinated, he watched the black wall as it lapped the little trench wherein he had so recently lain, and seemed to pause an instant on the edge, before it burst down to smother his cloak. Cold-hearted, he still gazed on it, knowing now that he must die a chilly death, and not as he had always hoped, with the heat of battle in his throat.

No help was there, for no sun shone to set the magic wheel aflame and dry a path away for him. Sorrowfully he thought of Dectera his mother, the father he had never known but whom he had vowed to find, of Conall and Ferdia his friends, and how they would wait and watch for him through the years to come, and how, when all hope had gone out of the watching, they would wonder how he had died; but most of all he thought of Emer, his heart's love, for whose sake he had fared forth on this the great adventure—and still the morass rose steadily.

Now a great peace came upon him, and as the black ooze crept, it may be a foot nearer, all hope seemed lost. Just as the dawn was breaking, the flood which had climbed to Cuchulain's waist rolled something against him, something that seemed like a mud-coated log. The flood trembled and paused, then slowly receded; the surface water following after, swirled about the object the morass had dropped at Cuchulain's feet, washing clean the poor

corpse-white face of a man, one who had doubtless died questing for fame, even as Cuchulain quested.

It would almost seem that the morass, having laid its warning to seek no further at the wanderer's feet, was content to spare his life, sure in the knowledge that he would read the warning aright and so forego the perils ahead. But the Fates little knew Cuchulain if they thought this, for day had broken a cheerless dawn indeed—but light had come to the world and to Cuchulain's soul; his night of doubt was over, and he knew the ultimate hour of trial was not yet come, for had not the strange Lord, who succoured him when he was like to die in the barren lands, said that he would again appear to him in the hour of his utmost need; and lo, through all that night of terror he had not come, wherefore the end was not yet.

Reverently Cuchulain took up the body of that other poor wanderer and gently laid him in the shallow trench he had hollowed overnight for the temporary rest of his own tired limbs. Awe enfolded him as he gazed on the still beauty of the peaceful features, so serene and so dispassionate, cleansed of all toil and struggling by the effacing hand of death.

Ere he covered the poor clay with the all-healing earth, strange thoughts welled up in the heart of this son of a rough, crude age, for although the messenger of the morass affrighted him not nor turned him from his purpose, yet the tranquil calm of the corpse taught Cuchulain something of the majesty of Death, and the littleness of Life; how small we are and how insignificant in the mighty scheme of things. We come and go upon our small occasions like a hill full of busy ants, working out our appointed task, our minds obsessed by our tiny joys and sorrows—great they seem to us—until the cold hand of death wipes clean the slate, or leaves the stage clear for yet another player to strut and mow, playing his little part, while not one in a million emblazons his name on the scroll of fame, to be handed down through the ages. Yet each of us in his generation contributes his part to

make the history, good or bad, of his Country, in the age in which he lives.

The beginnings of such thoughts as these formed dimly in the wanderer's mind that morning, as he girded on his gear and set the flaming wheel rolling forward on its way in the rays of the new-born sun. Yet Cuchulain is gone with Hercules and Hector, how many thousand years ago, who shall say? Truly his name survives by virtue of his mighty deeds, but only as a beautiful myth, for who knows how fell the pride of Erin, the most glorious warrior of his race, or where lies his body or the head they shore from off him?

On through the day Cuchulain trudged, weary from his restless night, parched with thirst and desperately hungry, but thankful for the sun overhead after the horrors of the devil-ridden night; with the westering afternoon sun the wanderer saw sloping fields rising steeply from the slime, and behind them again, some ten miles away, a great range of hills; and ever as he went the wheel closed up a path before him.

Hour after hour he trudged on in the wake of his strange path-maker and reached dry land as the last ray of the sun, setting behind the ridge of hills, struck in molten glory on the rim of the wheel, and then it seemed to Cuchulain that the sun's ray was gently withdrawn, as the beckoning finger of an unseen hand glides behind a curtain. For a moment he mused on this, and then, looking down, discovered that the wheel, given him by that strange man who succoured him in the Plains of Ill Luck, had disappeared with the sun ray.

Two or three hours of daylight yet remained, and these were spent in tramping over the springy turf of the ever-rising fields, until at last a great inland sea burst upon the surprised vision of Cuchulain. In every direction lay water, nothing but water, its surface ruffled by the evening breeze which sent the little wavelets lapping on the shore.

Across this great expanse Cuchulain looked out, until his gaze came to rest on the far-off hills. Any exploration was out of the question for that night, and, moreover, the

immediate need of a meal was making itself unpleasantly felt.

As he looked across the water Cuchulain was aware of many swans swimming majestically, and into his mind came the thought, "On one of these birds I must make my meal." But how to catch one? that indeed was the question! The birds were well out of reach of a javelin flung by hand or even of a stone cast by a sling.

Cuchulain thought for a space, and then, going quietly behind a bush, he stripped off his garments and smeared his body from the top of his head to the soles of his feet—not excepting his face—with sticky yellow clay, in order that the whiteness of his flesh might not shew up in the translucent water.

Like an otter gliding from the rock above the pool, he took to the water, swimming quietly until only a couple of hundred yards separated him from the swans. At this stage he dived deep, and, swimming under water, came up fully fifty yards further on. His next dive took him to within a hundred yards of his prey, and here he rested, treading water with head thrown back and only his nostrils and lips protruding above the surface to enable him to draw long, deep breaths for the supreme effort.

Midway between Cuchulain and the swans a patch of reeds floated on the water. When he had regained his breath and fully charged his lungs with air, he let himself sink quietly down, down, down, until the glimmer of light above him was dim, and then, striking out strongly, he swam until, allowing himself to rise, a dark patch overhead warned him that the reeds were above.

Rising gently he was overjoyed to find a large log floating amidst the débris. With one clay-smeared hand upon the log and his nose and mouth above the water to allow him to breathe, Cuchulain began to paddle quietly with his feet, moving the whole mass of rubbish slowly and almost imperceptibly towards the unsuspecting quarry.

Nearer and ever nearer he worked his way until a bare six yards separated him from the swans; sinking again, he drew a knife from its sheath in the belt about his waist, placing the steel between his teeth as he swam on; with

a strong kick of his legs, he came to the surface right among the birds.

A quick grab with the left hand secured a leg as the whole bunch rose in squarking fright; it was the work of an instant to transfer the knife from his teeth to his right hand, and then the water all around was stained crimson, as the steel went home amidst the snowy breast plumage of the great swan.

His supper now secured, Cuchulain ferried the carcass to the log among the débris, to which he strapped it with his waist belt, and, pushing his prize before him, swam ashore.

Once on land he dressed quickly, lighted a fire, and, while the sticks were crackling briskly, he drew and cleaned the swan, and cut off the feet and head; next he encased the whole carcass in a thick coating of clay, after first stuffing it with wild berries, and then, raking aside the fire, he placed the mass in the heart of the embers and replaced the burning logs.

By the time he had prepared his camp for the night and cleaned his weapons, the fire was almost out, and from the heart of it he raked out his ball of clay, now baked hard.

As he split the ball open with his knife, the feathers came away bedded firm in the clay, and the bird lay before him, clean plucked, cooked, and ready to eat.

Cuchulain was ravenous, but he had to wait awhile for the steaming bird to cool sufficiently, and then he fed right royally, cutting long strips of the delicate flesh off with his knife.

Finally he made up the fire and dropped into a sleep of repletion and utter fatigue, nor did he wake until the day was far advanced.

Another day and night he rested on the shores of the lake, pondering how best he might reach the far-off range of hills. The distance was too great to swim, and no boat was to be obtained in this lonely spot. Cuchulain did not know how far the shore of the lake extended on either hand, so the task of walking round this great inland sea seemed therefore too arduous to be undertaken. There

remained then only for him to build some sort of raft on which to ferry himself across the water.

Luckily trees grew in abundance, but it was slow work lopping branches suitable to his purpose and binding them together with creepers; indeed he spent two whole days in this way before the work was finished. On the morning of the fifth day after he had come to these shores he was able to set forth on his voyage to the great unknown.

All day he paddled along, and by evening had reached a barren, forbidding shore, with no opening to be seen and no place in sight at which a landing might be effected. The wall of rock seemed to rise straight up from the water's edge with never a break to right or left. At last a knob of rock offered a mooring point, and so Cuchulain spent the night aboard his crude raft, sleeping fitfully.

With daylight came the problem of how these tremendous cliffs, nearly a thousand feet in height, were to be surmounted or passed; straight up from the water's edge they rose, grim and forbidding, up and up until the brain grew dizzy and dwarfed before the immensity of this sheer wall of rock unrelieved by tree or shrub.

Should the wanderer row right or left?

Cuchulain paddled his boat out a hundred feet or so from the face of the cliff and then surveyed it; no current drew him to one hand or the other, only the little breeze-activated waves lapped against the edge of his raft. Looking to the right the cliff seemed to preserve a uniform height, but to the left it appeared to slope gradually away. It was to the left then that Cuchulain set his course, preserving his distance of about a hundred feet from the cliffs as he paddled.

Mid-day had gone, and with it another goodly portion of the swan, before any likelihood of making further progress towards the dūn of Skatha occurred to him. Then, just as he was coming to the conclusion that he would have to paddle his raft to the limit of the range of hills before he could proceed farther on his journey, a tiny hole in the wall of rock was seen. At the distance he was from the hole, Cuchulain could not decide if it

was merely the mouth of a cave, or, as he hoped, the entrance to a passage.

A few quick strokes brought the raft directly under the opening, and, reaching up with his hands to steady himself, Cuchulain looked in, only to be confronted with absolute blackness. Obviously a further exploration was necessary, so his bundle was hove up on to the ledge, and he followed, thinking as he did so that in all probability he would have to swim to recover his raft if the search proved to be a long one.

Inside, the opening was large enough to allow a tall man to stand upright, but farther in, the roof descended, until it was all Cuchulain could do to squeeze his body along on all fours.

He had almost decided that he was, after all, in a cave, which at best would but serve him as a shelter for the night, when his hand encountered some wooden object, which, from its shape, appeared to be a boat.

Going back to the entrance, Cuchulain discovered from the high-water mark that the waves evidently lapped the ledge at times, which might account for the presence of a boat inside. Kindling a torch, of which he had had the forethought to prepare a supply, he went back to examine his find, and then discovered it to be a frail coracle resting close by a hole at the end of the passage, which appeared to lead to a larger cave beyond. Through this hole Cuchulain squeezed with difficulty and found himself on a narrow path sloping steeply downwards.

For some two hundred yards he proceeded cautiously, until he felt his feet submerged in running water. Stepping circumspectly, he went on till the water rose up to his chin, and forced him to return to the daylight to think things over.

In the first place, the presence of the coracle would seem to argue that the path had been attempted before, and that either the man had successfully accomplished his journey, or, what was still more likely, had perished in the attempt. The fact that the cave in which he sat was perfectly dry indicated that the waters of the lake

seldom, if ever, rose to this height, and yet there was running water beyond, which seemed to indicate another entrance to the cliffs below the level of the lake, or at some other point further along. But the most important point to Cuchulain's mind was the fact that the water in the far passage was *running*, which appeared to him to suggest the presence of a vast underground sea fed by the lake; or another lake on the far side of the mountains, into which the underground stream flowed.

A goodly quantity of the swan, which had weighed close on thirty pounds, remained, and so Cuchulain decided to sleep over the matter, and for that purpose made the cave habitable and kindled a fire of drift wood he found scattered on the floor. First satisfying himself that the coracle was seaworthy, he dismantled his raft, making such portions of the wood as were suitable for the purpose into torches. The remainder he kept to replenish his fire.

Next morning he got the coracle down to the point at which the underground stream welled up, apparently from the bowels of the earth, and then, fetching his goods from the mouth of the cave, he packed them into his frail craft, not forgetting his supply of torches and the paddle which had served to propel the raft across the lake.

He launched his tiny barque, and getting aboard, pushed off on his weird underground journey, the end of which neither he nor any man might foresee.

CHAPTER VII

THE boat drifted leisurely along at first, and by the light of his torch Cuchulain could see that the roof rose higher and higher above him until finally it was lost in the gloom above. The stream also widened to a river with a strong current in the middle. An occasional stroke of the paddle served to maintain the direction of the boat. There was no great chance of having his skull stove in, and so with a view to husbanding his torches against future need, Cuchulain did not light another when the one he had lit at the commencement of the journey sputtered out. He did, however, take the precaution of stretching a javelin above his head at the full length of his arm pretty frequently to ensure against any untoward mishap by reason of the roof growing lower. He also thrust a torch through his girdle in case it should be needed in a hurry—a very wise action, for which he was soon to be thankful.

In the darkness, which was so dense that it could almost be felt, the only sound was made by the water against the sides of the tunnel. Shifting his position, Cuchulain's hand encountered the cold flesh of the swan in the bow of the boat with a start, and, remembering that it must be many hours since he had breakfasted, he cut off some strips of meat, which he devoured and washed down by water gathered from the river in his cupped hands.

When he dipped his hands into the water to satisfy his thirst, Cuchulain realised that the stream which flowed so leisurely at first had now developed into a swiftly flowing river, and lighting a torch, he discovered that the boat was flying along between narrow walls at a tremendous pace; the roof, however, was still lost in illimitable darkness.

On flew the boat with ever-growing speed, the water swirled like a mill-race, and suddenly there loomed ahead

a straight wall of rock some four feet above the level of the river. Instantly realising his danger, Cuchulain stood up and, as the boat appeared about to crash to its doom, he leaped forward and upward, sprawling flat on his face on the ledge, as the boat was sucked under and disappeared.

Cuchulain had flung the torch from him as he leaped, and now lay in Stygian darkness, not knowing whether a firm path lay before him or only the waters of the river, which might well have passed through a hole in the rock, to emerge on the other side and bar his further progress. If so, he was indeed in a desperate position, for the current was too swift and the distance too great to swim back whence he had come, and here was the wanderer, after all his perseverance, buried in the bowels of the earth, with little prospect of ever seeing daylight again.

So Cuchulain sat and mused for a time, and then, remembering the torch in his belt, lit it. To his joy he saw stretching away before him a path washed smooth by many waters; the roof was lost above, but the walls bore testimony that when the river was in spate from the lake he had left, the water rose many fathoms above his head.

With only one torch to light his way, it was obvious Cuchulain must push rapidly forward or he might wander underground until he died of starvation if the path branched off ahead.

As a matter of fact, the path did so divide before he had gone a mile along it. One path led upwards, while the other sloped steeply downwards. Arguing that the rising ground was the more likely to lead out into the open, Cuchulain followed the upward trend and tramped on, by this time feeling the pangs of hunger again keenly.

The atmosphere was close and muggy in this confined passage, but presently it grew purer, and with the freshening of the air came a degree of coldness which rapidly asserted itself. The torch had long since burnt itself out, but looking up, Cuchulain saw one star gleaming brightly overhead and knew that the Stygian darkness of the tunnel was passed and that the good fresh air now blew

above him, but so far above that no passing breeze was wafted down into these abysmal depths.

Utterly weary, he sank down and slept.

When Cuchulain awoke, a glimmer of light was to be seen far overhead, by which he judged that another day had dawned, but so deep was the rift in the mountains in which he lay that all the surroundings were in gloom; no shaft of sunlight could penetrate so far, for they were all swallowed up in the glistening black walls above.

"I perceive that this is an evil place," said Cuchulain out loud, and then jumped up startled, as his voice went ringing and echoing from crag to crag, ending in a whisper of sound far away.

No food was to be found in the wanderer's wallet, and his water-skin had perished as the coracle was sucked under when the river dived again into the depths of the earth.

Imagine, then, Cuchulain's plight as he started off once more, weary, battered and spent by toil, with hunger and thirst gnawing at his vitals. How endless must have seemed the path as he trudged on hour after hour, occasionally glancing up to where the streak of daylight might be seen between the high, unscalable cliffs; after awhile the rocks closed in over his head, and once more he was walking in a subterranean tunnel.

It was with a beating heart that at last he saw a pathway rising up before him and espied the true daylight ahead through a crack in the rocks, which, however, seemed to block the path effectually.

A tentative push or two at the rocks killed any hope that the task of getting into the outer world from this horrible underground passage was to be an easy one. Sitting down, Cuchulain rested himself to gather strength for what was like to be a Titanic effort.

What if the rocks should prove immovable? What if the drop outside should be precipitous, even if the rocks could be shifted? These, and a thousand other questions, sent Cuchulain staggering to his feet to solve the question once for all before even his iron nerves should give way and his wanderings end in madness.

For minutes he tugged, thrust and strove frenziedly, until at last he was forced to desist from very lack of breath. His shoulders were bruised and aching, blood oozed from the quicks of his fingers and dropped down from the nails, and the veins stood out on his neck and forehead like knotted whipcord, while his chest heaved with great sobbing breaths.

With rest came deadly calm, and reason was brought to the aid of brute force. The point of his javelin was inserted into the crack through which the daylight shone, and worked carefully round until the opening widened appreciably. Pausing a moment to rest, Cuchulain could hear a trickle of rubble and small stones rattling away down the hillside without, from which he judged that the drop outside was not sheer after all; so greatly heartened, he resumed his task.

The chink he was working at formed a small open space between two rocks, and it was to the higher one Cuchulain devoted his efforts. Having dug out every scrap of loose stuff from the base, he now turned his attention to the top, and to his joy found that by exerting his full strength he was able to displace several large fragments of stone. This did not appreciably loosen the main rock, but it gave him a better light by which to work. On the left side the great rock defied all his efforts, for it seemed to fit into a hollow in the solid cliff, as if a space had been hollowed there for it to rest in, by the hand of man. On the other side, however, it was only wedged in by small fragments of stone, which came away easily inwards to the picking of his fingers; but without, there rested a large stone which was more difficult to move. The space he had cleared was not big enough for his hand to pass through, and the strength of his extended fingers alone was not sufficient to force the stone outwards. Next he tried his javelin, only to find that the point slipped sideways from the rounded surface at every effort.

Again and again he tried, and then set himself diligently to work to chip a hole in the face of the stone with the blade of his hunting knife. It was slow and tedious work,

but at last the hole was sufficiently deep, and into it he inserted the point of his javelin and put his weight upon the shaft. The good ash bent like a sapling in the breeze! At last Cuchulain hit upon the solution of the difficulty; sitting down with his back against the rock and the javelin over his shoulder gripped short up by the head, he put forth all his might, and the stone flew outwards, but he barked his knuckles badly as the resistance to the point of the javelin was removed.

Now, his task almost done, he nerves himself for the final effort. The great stone is so loose that it rocks to the pressure of his hand, and yet it is so immense that all his strength will be needed to lift it clear. Twice he tries to push it outwards with his hands, but fails, and then he turns and gets his shoulder under the inward bulge. Great beads of sweat drop from him as he strains; he is like a huge mole trying to burrow his way to the open. The rock trembles and groans; it rises with a rending, tearing sound, rocks rattle outside as they are displaced; Cuchulain pauses and draws a mighty breath; he strains again, and the pressure against his bruised and blackened flesh grows less as the great mass of stone turns over and falls outwards with a crash.

Far away he sees the sun sinking to rest behind the distant hills as he lies half in and half out of the hole. Too exhausted to raise himself from the position into which he has fallen, he feasts his eyes on the world he had half feared never to see again. Far below him a stream gushes out of the mountain-side; falling downwards in a cascade, it flows to water a pleasant valley of green fields and woods, beyond which rises a range of hills. These Cuchulain searches with his eyes, and at last his gaze comes to rest on a cluster of dwellings illumined by the last rays of the setting sun.

Hardly able to believe that he sees aright, Cuchulain feasts his gaze on the evidence of the presence of his fellowmen in this distant land, and determines to journey thither on the morrow, but for the present he must go hungry through the night. He, however, makes a great effort and drags his weary limbs down the mountain side

to the spot where the waterfall bursts out, and here he quenches his burning thirst, bathes his wounds and makes a poor and frugal meal of berries.

All next day he trudges on, first down the mountain side, then across the plains, where he makes shift to feed off a nest full of raw eggs he is lucky enough to stumble upon. Finally he begins to climb the hills until he comes in sight of the dwellings he has seen overnight from the opposite mountains.

These dwellings resolve themselves into a noble dūn but it is on the far side of a narrow, deep ravine with turgid waters swirling far below.

Disconsolately Cuchulain wanders along the edge of the ravine until in the distance he perceives what appears to be a bridge. He hastens towards it, but his iron frame will stand no more, and with a sigh he sinks into that state of oblivion which is the natural result of great mental and bodily strain unsupported by food.

Cuchulain lies still and stark among the rocks, but Fate is watching over him, and presently a party of merry young men comes singing along the way, returning from a gay hunting quest.

One spies the body lying still, and all gather round, but he who has found this piece of human jetsam orders them back. One he bids fetch water, and another to lift up the unconscious head, while he himself forces a draught of heather ale between the lips.

Water is brought and dashed into Cuchulain's face, while the party stand around anxiously watching for signs of returning life, but there is no motion of the still limbs, nor even the quiver of an eyelid.

Everything is tried, but without result, and at last the leader bids his companions make a litter of their spears and cloaks. On this they place the wanderer and bear him away to their huts, which are directly opposite the bridge Cuchulain was making for when he collapsed, and on this side of the ravine.

Arrived at the huts they carefully undress Cuchulain, bathe and dress his wounds, and put him to bed.

A strong draught of Grecian wine causes him to open

his eyes for a moment, and then he rolls over and falls into a deep sleep.

Seeing that he is utterly exhausted, the leader of the party who had found him orders his companions to leave Cuchulain in peace, and to hang a skin over the hut entrance to darken the interior. One he leaves to sit in the hut to minister to the wants of their unconscious guest if he should wake.

CHAPTER VIII

WHEN Cuchulain at last awoke from his long sleep, he found himself in bed in a strange hut.

At first, to his sleep-dimmed senses, it seemed that he was back in the dūn of King Conor Mac Nessa at Emain Macha, but the rich wall hangings of the royal apartments were missing. Then he thought he must be again in the dwelling of that cheery old farmer who had set him on his way, but the clang and clash of arms without, and the measured tramp of soldiers drilling gave the lie to that suggestion of his brain.

Dazedly, as one newly awakened from sleep, he lay and cogitated, until the raising of the skin door portal and the entrance of a strange youth brought home to him the fact that he was in a place and among people hitherto unknown to him.

"Awake at last, Stranger?" queried the youth, and then added, "I will call our leader." Thus saying, he hurried away before Cuchulain could question him as to his present whereabouts and how he came to be there, for all memory of the preceding days was completely effaced from his mind.

The martial sounds from without ceased; the door-covering was drawn aside, and a fine stalwart young man, almost as powerfully built as Cuchulain's self, stood within the portal, his features hidden by reason of the fact that his back was to the light, and the interior of the hut in shadow.

"I have ordered food and milk to be brought to you," was the new-comer's first remark.

At the voice Cuchulain started up on his arm and gazed intently at the stranger's face as he came forward into the hut, allowing the light to flow in behind him.

Cuchulain gazed and gazed, rubbed his eyes and gasped as one who sees a vision, and then—"Ferdia" burst from his lips, a heart-whole cry of gladness.

It was now the leader's turn to start and to gaze intently on his guest, as he queried:

"Who art thou that calls me by my name, and whence hast thou journeyed to this place to which no other man has ever attained unguided?"

"Hast thou forgotten Cuchulain, Ferdia? thy friend who played with thee at hurley on the green at Emain Macha?"

"Before Lugh!" exclaimed Ferdia, "if thou art in truth Cuchulain thou art strangely changed, and yet, methinks those mighty limbs may well bear out the promise of thy youth."

Well might Ferdia say that Cuchulain was changed, for the trials of the journey and the final horrors of the underground path, and the last supreme effort by which he had won free into the world again, had sadly altered his appearance.

There was no lustre in his hair, his cheeks were shrunken and wan, and his eyes sunken and ringed with black. The long sleep, however, had done much to strengthen him, and rest and good feeding would soon restore to him his glorious young manhood.

"Yes!" said Ferdia again, "I can see that thou art that Cuchulain I loved in my boyhood; it warms my heart to see thee again, and I am all afire to hear the story of thy wanderings, but thou must not talk until thou hast eaten."

Just then a serving man entered, bearing a smoking dish of goat's flesh and a horn filled with milk, which he placed on a stool beside the bed.

As Cuchulain ate and drank, his strength grew anew within him, and with the renewal of his vital forces grew the recollection of all that he had passed through.

Ferdia seated himself and watched his friend as he ate. Presently he asked:

"Dost thou not wonder where thou hast arrived so opportunely in thy wanderings, Cuchulain?"

"Why, yes I do, but knowing that thou didst set out to acquire knowledge from Skatha but a year ago, I feel

sure that I have nearly accomplished my own journey, and that the dūn of Skatha lies not far from hence."

"Indeed thou speakest truth, Cuchulain. The dwelling of our mistress Skatha can be seen across the ravine, and is but separated from it by the Bridge of the Leaps, and yet none of us who live here in these huts has ever visited the dūn, for the last feat which Skatha teaches to her pupils is the Hero's Salmon Leap, by which the bridge is crossed.

"There is one other feat which Skatha has to teach, the throwing of the Gae Bolg, but she has never yet seen a champion whom she considers worthy to wield the weapon. It is a terrible implement, which is thrown from between the toes. To be struck with it is certain death, for once it has entered the flesh, all its barbs open out, the flesh almost meets over it, and it can only be dragged out by main force, so that the man into whose body it enters must of a certainty bleed to death. It is, however, geise for the holder of the Gae Bolg to use it except in the last extremity."

Cuchulain was greatly interested in this description, and within his own soul determined to grow into so great a champion that Skatha would gladly give him this wonderful weapon and willingly teach him to wield it.

"Tell me, Ferdia," asked Cuchulain, "has no one of you yet attempted to cross the Bridge of the Leaps?"

"Yes!" answered Ferdia, "twice I have dared the feat, but each time the bridge has risen up against me and flung me back to this side of the ravine, and to fall from it midway is to perish miserably in the depths beneath, which are infested with most fearsome monsters."

"How then is this Bridge passed if it rises up and flings the jumper back?"

"He who would cross to the other side must spring far out and up, and land exactly on the point we call the centre of the Bridge, from whence he must leap again immediately to the farther shore. If the jumper lands short of the point he will be flung back, and if he hesitates an instant before making his second leap, he will

fall into the waters below, for the Bridge is too narrow for a man to retain his balance thereon. But why askest thou, Cuchulain? Surely thou wilt not try to pass until Skatha hath taught thee?"

"That will I," said Cuchulain, "and before the sun hath twice more lit the world. Thou hast tried and failed, why then should not I essay the feat, and perchance succeed? Dost hope to win this belly spear that thou call'st a Gae Bolg, Ferdia?"

"I do indeed!"

"Ah! then, in this I perceive that we two shall be rivals."

A silence fell upon the twain while Cuchulain finished his meal, and then Ferdia said:

"If thou art rested and refreshed, let us go out; these dull huts stifle me upon a day like this, and I would hear the tale of thy adventures."

When they emerged from the hut, Ferdia called up his companions of the night before, and made their guest known to them, and then they all seated themselves around on the grass, whilst Cuchulain related all that tale of his travels and trials since he left Emain Macha, which has already been set forth in these pages.

During the recital a cloaked figure slipped into the shelter of a hut and leaned against it, listening to the tale.

When the narrative ended, all sat silent and amazed, until the person in the cloak broke the spell by saying:

"Cuchulain, thou hast done well and bravely, and one day thou shalt be the foremost champion in all Ireland. Even the arduous passage of Perilous Glen which thou hast avoided is as naught to the steadfast courage which brought thee safely through the subterranean passage of the mountains."

At the sound of that voice, all rose respectfully to their feet, except Cuchulain, for the cloaked figure was none other than Skatha's self, who had joined the group unobserved by any in the enthralling interest of the tale.

Skatha then drew Cuchulain on one side and asked him many pertinent questions, which amply satisfied her

as to the truth of the story he had told, and caused her to accept him gladly as a pupil.

With a word to Ferdia as to the care and entertainment of her new pupil, she departed to her dūn by way of the Bridge of the Leaps.

Cuchulain watched her performance keenly as she crossed to the other side, determining to essay the feat himself before the sun had set.

Cuchulain spent the day with Ferdia in watching his fellow-pupils practising the feats of arms Skatha had already taught them, but he found nothing therein to surprise him; indeed, he saw nothing that he had not already learned at the hands of Fergus Mac Roy, his half-uncle.

As evening was drawing on, Cuchulain said to Ferdia :

“Wilt thou come with me to the Bridge of the Leaps? for I am set upon trying that feat before the sun goes down.”

Ferdia did all he could to dissuade him, but Cuchulain was in no wise to be turned from his resolution. He had made up his mind to attempt the feat, and nothing the other could say would stop him. In vain Ferdia urged that Cuchulain was not yet fully recovered from his journey; in vain he pleaded with him, and so at last they set out for the Bridge, followed by their fellow-pupils.

On reaching the Bridge, Cuchulain found that it was formed by two slender fingers of rock jutting out from the cliffs on either side and almost meeting across the ravine—a narrow chasm cut in the living rock by some enormous cataclysm of nature, which had splintered and torn its way into the bowels of the earth, rending the rock asunder and leaving great beetling, jagged cliffs on either side between which strong gusts of wind tore back and forth.

From the cliff on which Cuchulain stood, a spur of rock some twenty-three or four feet long jutted out; its base was immensely thick, but the spur tapered to a point scarce two feet across at the far end.

Now a curious thing must be related of this spur of rock; it has been said that it was broad at the base, but

it was also perfectly rounded upon the underside, and fitted into a socket on the cliff face in such a way that any weight suddenly projected upon the point of the spur depressed it sufficiently to cause it to rise up as the base turned in its socket joint. It was obvious, therefore, that a second spring must be made while the point was actually depressed, and before the mass rose up to fling the jumper back, or off into the abyss.

At first Cuchulain thought the difficulty might be solved by simply crawling across, but on closer inspection he found that a space of some six feet separated the spur on his side of the chasm, from the slab of living rock which jutted out some seven or eight feet from the opposite cliff.

The red afterglow of day lit all the sky and illumined the scudding clouds, which, racing overhead, foretold a stormy morrow, as Cuchulain divested himself of all his outer garments, until he stood up clad only in his lambskin vest and under-drawers.

First measuring carefully the length of the spur with his eye, he next paced out his run upon the bank.

Like an arrow from a bow he sped along the path, next instant he was in mid-air, springing up and out like a chamois; but he fell short of the point by five feet, and knowing that a second leap would be fatal, allowed himself to be flung back into the arms of his comrades.

Again he tried, and again fell too far short of the point to risk the second leap which should carry him to the far rock.

Now he lay down to rest, and the pupils of Skatha jeered at him, all except Ferdia, who leaned over his friend as he lay extended on the turf which fringed the lip of the chasm.

"Give it up, Cuchulain," said Ferdia, "or at least wait until to-morrow to make a further effort, when thou art fully rested from thy wanderings."

"No!" answered Cuchulain. "By the Light above me I swear to cross that gulf to-night or perish in the attempt. But get thou wine for me to drink, and fat wherewith to rub my limbs, and I will try again."

As he spoke, a finger of light lit upon the extreme point of the rock, and seemed to Cuchulain an omen in answer to his vow.

Just then a strong breeze sprang up, blowing from the shore on which they stood, to aid him further in the coming leap.

"Oh! oh!" jeered the pupils of Skatha, "the stranger thinks he is greater than us all, and orders our Captain, Ferdia, to fetch and carry for him. Great is Cuchulain, and great is his name in the land."

Thus they mocked him, but Ferdia fetched wine and fat and did as his friend had asked.

Presently Cuchulain rose and said quietly, "I am ready."

And now he skims over the ground like a swallow on the wing. And so great was the downward thrust of his leg as he took-off for the leap, that his footprint remained bedded in the turf for many days to come.

A gasp of wonder goes up from the watchers as his body hurtles through the air, for almost it seems that he will overshoot the spur altogether and fall into the waters below, so great is the leap he has made. But, no! he lands fairly on the point of the rock on his right foot only, and at once springs again, clearing the farther point and landing fairly on the grass of the opposite cliff.

The silence of wonder ensues for a moment, and then cheer upon cheer bursts from Ferdia and his companions.

Some exclaim loudly upon the speed with which he ran forward to the leap; some point excitedly to that footprint deep embedded in the sod, while others turn shamefacedly aside at the thought that they have mocked so great a champion. But Ferdia, his face alight with joy, stands upon the brink of the precipice and stretches out his arms across the gulf which now separates him from Cuchulain.

The clamour brings Skatha and her attendants from the dūn in haste, and they too stand amazed at Cuchulain's prowess and daring.

"What manner of youth is this," queried Skatha, "who journeys to my dūn unguided and alone, and then,

before he is recovered from the rigours of the journey, accomplishes the Hero's Salmon Leap untaught of my knowledge? Surely, Cuchulain, thou shalt be the glory of Ireland, and thy deeds shall be sung by skald and bard, when we who talk to-day are dust."

That night there was great feasting in the dūn of Skatha in honour of this strange youth who had appeared among them so unexpectedly, and to him was assigned the place of honour at Skatha's right hand.

Late and long they feasted, and many and wonderful were the tales Cuchulain heard of the prowess of those who had learned the profession of arms before him, in this place.

At last they bade him relate to them the tale of his own deeds, as was the custom of the period, but this Cuchulain would not do, for he was ever a modest man.

The retainers of Skatha grumbled not a little at his refusal, but Skatha herself loved the lad for his reticence and modesty, and gloried in the pride of his beautiful young manhood. None the less she resolved not to try him too high during his pupilage, for he was not yet come to his prime, and lacked a good deal of the mighty strength which was to make him the most famous champion of the age in later years.

CHAPTER IX

For a year Cuchulain abode at the dūn of Skatha learning many wonderful feats of arms, until at last he was deemed worthy to wield the belly spear, that wonderful weapon Ferdia had told him of on the day following his arrival.

During all the time he abode at the dūn, he was Skatha's favourite pupil and beloved by all his comrades; but his dearest friend and the keenest rival he had in all manly pursuits and feats of arms was Ferdia.

It was Cuchulain's fate that all through life, all people, men and women alike, should love him, and that to those he loved the best, he should bring most evil and unhappiness, except to Emer alone.

It wanted but two days to the time when Cuchulain and Ferdia should set out upon their return journey to Emain Macha, and all things were made ready.

Skatha had determined to give the Gae Bolg to Cuchulain as a parting gift, for of all her pupils, she considered him only worthy to use it in battle.

Now it so chanced that, among the women warriors of that period, there lived one named Aifa, who alone of all the Amazons was Skatha's equal. She was also Skatha's deadliest foe, and ruled over the adjoining province.

About the time arranged for the departure of Cuchulain and Ferdia, Aifa determined on a fresh attempt to assert her superiority over her rival and to capture all that land over which Skatha ruled.

On the last day of Cuchulain's stay in the Land of Shadows two messengers, bearing in their hands branches of peace, came riding up to the Bridge of the Leaps, and with shrill blasts on the horn they demanded audience of Skatha.

Hastily summoning her guard, Skatha went out and across a secret bridge to meet the messengers.

"What is thy pleasure, Strangers?" she asked, "and whence come ye?"

"We be envoys from the great Queen Aifa, oh Skatha!" they made reply.

"And what message bear ye from my sister Aifa?"

"This is our message, that it is our lady's will that ye straightway acknowledge her sovereignty over all this Land of Shadows, and that ye journey with us to her dūn to do homage for the land, which in future, by her gracious clemency, Queen Aifa deigns to allow ye to hold in charge for her."

"And if I refuse, what then?"

The enemy answered promptly:

"The worst that may befall; fire and sword throughout the land, to all who follow thee death by the sword, and for thyself, no hope of escape, but death by torture."

"Thy breath is long and thy courage great, oh envoy," sneered Skatha.

"The breeze of morning announces the storm of night," replied the envoy menacingly.

While this colloquy had been going on, Cuchulain and Ferdia had ridden up, and now Skatha saw them, and on a sudden impulse said:

"Cuchulain is in my confidence, his lips interpret my thoughts; speak them, Cuchulain, and give this envoy his answer."

Cuchulain leaped from his horse and strode up to the messengers. A great pride filled his soul at the trust Skatha had reposed in him. His body seemed to swell, and his flashing eyes presaged great words as he stared straight into the cold face of the envoy who had spoken.

"Envoy of Aifa, go back to thy mistress and say to her that Skatha bows the knee to none; that if Aifa carries sword and fire into this land, we will give her back blow for blow; tell her that we revile and defy her, spit on her name! We are not so poor in spirit that we fear the croak of a hag-headed raven. We are well armed and willing for war, but when our arms are broken, and when Skatha has none to stand beside her but Cuchulain, who speaks to thee, and his shield brother Ferdia, our answer to Aifa will be the same. 'Thou hast threatened this land with sword and flame, thou art

knocking at our gates. Beware lest we fling them wide and come to speak with the foe in our borders."

"Big words, boy!" Haughtily spoke the envoy. "In thy turn, beware lest in the day of battle I tie thee to the tail of my war chariot and beat thee with my spear shaft, 'ere thou art sent to help the maidens tend the kine."

Thus speaking, he turned to mount his horse, but his words were too much for Cuchulain, whose eyes were fairly blazing with fury. Stretching out his long arm he gripped the envoy by the shoulder and twirled him round as a feather is spun in a gust of wind. Then, thrusting his face close to that of the man, he said in a voice of suppressed fury:

"Look well at me, thou dog! Hast thou looked?"

"Aye, boy, I have looked my fill."

"And wilt thou know me again?"

"I shall know thee."

"Good! for thou shalt stand against me in the battle, man to man. Thou dog! Thou wind-bag! Thou shalt stand face to face with Cuchulain—Cuchulain of the Red Branch of Ulster; thy dis-membered limbs shall feed the carrion birds, and thy head adorn my chariot wheels when thou shalt have bowed the knee to my war blade! Now go! Well for thee that thou art an envoy, or thou shouldst lie dead this instant."

When the envoys had gone, Cuchulain turned to Skatha and asked:

"Have my lips delivered thy thoughts, Mistress?"

"Indeed, we see eye to eye in this matter, Cuchulain; but thou shalt not see the end of it, for to-morrow thou must wend homewards to Emain Macha with Ferdia, while I must gather my host and march to meet Aifa."

With one voice Cuchulain and Ferdia protested.

"We go not hence but in thy train, until this matter be settled and the victory won. Thou alone hast taught us war-craft and in thy cause will we fight."

Seeing the lads so determined and so of one mind, Skatha let the matter rest there for the moment, but, in her own heart, she determined that neither should take

part in the fight lest evil should befall them ere they had grown to their full manhood.

For the next few days all was preparation for the march to meet Aifa's force as close to the border as possible.

The force Skatha was able to raise was a large one, but, if the spies spoke truth, the force marching against her under Aifa's command, was much larger.

Aifa had pitched her camp upon a plain half way up the mountains which formed the borders of her domains, and it was reported that she was waiting there in the hope that some of the neighbouring petty chiefs would come in to swell her ranks.

On the day that Skatha's host marched, she caused a strong draught to be poured into the heather ale which was placed before Cuchulain and Ferdia at their morning meal, thinking that so she would leave them at the dūn, and that when they awakened, the host would be well on its way, and the lads, unable to follow the unknown road, would remain in safety.

Skatha, however, had reckoned without Cuchulain's extraordinary vitality, and the draught which would have kept an ordinary man insensible for twenty-four hours, only served to keep him quiet until mid-day.

When Cuchulain awoke, he was still seated at table, and beside him Ferdia sprawled across the board. Over the whole building hung a death-like silence, and going outside he found the courtyard and outbuildings all deserted. He realised with a shock that the host had marched, and then, bethinking himself of Skatha's words, he saw that he and Ferdia had been left behind intentionally. Going back into the great living-hall, he exerted all his skill to rouse Ferdia; but in vain.

Cuchulain was not at the end of his resources yet by any means. Seeing that it was impossible to rouse Ferdia, he fetched their two horses, and by an ingenious arrangement slung a cloak between them, into which he lifted his unconscious friend, and, having strapped food and weapons on to the backs of the animals, started

calmly off to follow the host by the wheel tracks of the war chariots.

At best he could but journey slowly with the still unconscious Ferdia, and as he entertained no hope of overtaking the host that day, he camped early, and after making his friend comfortable and attending to the horses, he ate a frugal meal and went to sleep.

He was awakened early next morning by the sound of someone vomiting fearfully, and starting up, he beheld Ferdia in a cataclysm of sickness, as he cleared the remains of Skatha's powerful draught from his stomach.

This illness, however, did not last long, and after a wash and a tentative attempt at breakfast, Ferdia was ready to set out on the day's journey, and although the horse's action upset him again at first, the nausea wore off as the day got up, and by mid-morning he was discussing eagerly with Cuchulain the prospects of catching up the host before nightfall.

"They have a good deal of baggage with them, and many of the men are on foot," said Cuchulain, "so, at the rate we are travelling, we should catch them up in their camp this evening."

For a while they jogged on in silence, and then Cuchulain spoke again.

"The mist is beginning to rise up the mountains, so it will behove us to travel warily, for this part of the land is unfamiliar to me."

Again they journeyed on in silence until the mist sheets were unfurled about them, and a dense white wall enclosed them on every side.

"Stop," said Cuchulain, "and let us lead our horses, or we shall in all probability fall over the edge of some precipice."

For a few yards they wandered on, and then, by mutual impulse came to a standstill.

"We shall only lose the track of the chariot wheels if we wander on in this fog," said Ferdia, "already I feel by the unevenness of the ground that we have wandered from the path."

Presently a sudden flaw of wind whirled the mists

away for an instant, and before them they saw the ragged edge of a break in the ground, and below them a white abyss—naught beside!

“Oh! I perceive that it is time we stopped,” said Cuchulain then again.—

“Hark! I hear something cropping below,” and handing his horse’s reins to Ferdia, he crept on hands and knees to the brink of the chasm. Presently he could trace some lambs browsing below along the brown paths cleft in the rock face, and here and there green tufts of grass.

Gradually the mist subsided and bared to his view what appeared to be a great she-dragon with all her young about her.

Cuchulain spoke over his shoulder to Ferdia:

“It is my thought that we stand upon the edge of the world and below lies a great she-dragon suckling her young.”

Directing his gaze downward once more, Cuchulain saw the mists swirl and melt, and the terrible dragon resolved itself into a great tree lying prone where it had fallen, uprooted by some forgotten gale, and around it clustered boulders, which to his fog-distorted vision had been the dragon’s brood. Lower and lower into the chasm sank the mist, part rolled away and part vanished utterly, and behold below him, and to the right, a road wound down the mountain side to a spot where Skatha’s host rested in bivouac, with earthworks thrown up all around.

A glad shout from the watcher brought Ferdia to his side, and one look sent them both to their horses, and set them riding swiftly along the road until they came to the encampment, where Skatha welcomed them gladly, for in her heart she had been sorry to exclude two such champions from her following, although she had felt it her bounden duty to prevent their taking part in the approaching battle.

There was a great Council of War that evening, at which it was decided to attack Aifa on the plain where her host was now encamped, without waiting for her to advance further into the mountains, where it would pos-

sibly have been more easy for Skatha's hardy mountaineers to overcome their foes from the fertile plains.

Strategy was little thought of by the rough people of that rough and far off age, so it was with difficulty that Cuchulain persuaded Skatha to hold four hundred javelin men in reserve to turn the tide of the fight if need be. Indeed, Skatha only consented to this plan on condition that Cuchulain, who had suggested it, should take command of them and that Ferdia should stay with him. And now Cuchulain was fast in a cleft stick. He longed for the fight, but how could he expect Skatha to accept his advice if he himself refused to stay in command of the party he had counselled her to hold in reserve? And so, with the best grace he could muster, he consented.

That night the men slept on their spears, and long before dawn, moved out to the attack under Skatha's command.

Silently the fierce warriors crept down the mountain side and on to the plain, never pausing until the outline of the earthworks around Aifa's camp could be dimly discerned in the half light of the reflected dawn now stealing over the hills behind them.

As silently as they had come they lay down and waited for the pre-arranged signal—the hooting of an owl, twice repeated.

At this time the force of Skatha was spread out in a crescent, but with larger bodies of men collected at the points and centre than elsewhere, and further behind the centre, fully two hundred men waited in a mass, and behind them again Cuchulain's four hundred javelin men.

The plan of campaign was this. At the given signal, the whole line was to dash forward to the earthworks, and springing thereon, to rain a shower of javelins down into the camp. The centre was then to appear to break, to entice a part, at any rate, of the defenders into the open, and then, reinforced by the two hundred swordsmen waiting behind, the centre attack was to sweep through the middle of the enemy's earthwork, and to fight its way left and right to enable the points of the crescent to close in.

Cuchulain was left a free hand as to the disposition of his force and the time at which they were to be launched into the battle to turn the scale, and ensure a victory for Skatha's arms.

Suddenly the eerie note of the night bird re-echoed twice, and with a wild yell, fifteen hundred savage hill-men sprang to the attack. Over the earthworks they surged like a tidal wave, ruthlessly slaughtering the sentries as they raged on; but once over the earthworks a rude shock awaited them, for, instead of the sleeping camp they had expected, they were confronted by a second and higher earthwork, which was being hurriedly manned by Aifa's men.

This second earthwork was higher than the head of a tall man. It rose sheer from the ground, and all the face of it was studded with stakes—their points hardened in the heart of a fire. These stakes were crossed above and below, so that they met like the locked teeth of a ferret, and made the parapet well-nigh unscalable.

For a moment the attackers hold back, and then Skatha, a son on either side, dashes forward, the furs with which she is clad streaming out behind her. With one mighty leap she lands fairly on to the top of the bank; two javelins she has time to throw before she is thrust off by a long pole. And now her followers are in it too. Yelling, running, leaping, and cursing right up to the parapet they charge. Showers of javelins and stones rain on them from above, and pitfalls entrap them beneath, for the defenders have dug wedge-shaped pits in front of their earthworks and covered them with branches. Each pit is eight feet deep or more, and from the bottoms stand up sharpened stakes.

As the men tread on the false covering, down they fall, and soon each pit is full, and each stake bears its ghastly burden of human beings impaled like butterflies on a pin.

The living trample the dead and dying underfoot as they fight and climb up that awful wall. Three times they are hurled back, and three times they come on again.

The reserves, all except Cuchulain's band, are thrown into the fight, and still they cannot win their way past that inner line of defence. And now, far away on the left of the line there is heard a roar of cheering as Cuchulain leads his javelin men to the assault. Far in advance of his followers runs the Glory of Ireland, chanting as he runs. But where Skatha has failed Cuchulain and his men may not succeed. Once they force their way on to the parapet, fighting fiercely, and for many minutes hold their ground, a ring of dead all round them; but Aifa hurls one fresh troop after another upon them, and at last they are driven out. Then Skatha collects the remnants of her band and draws off, for in this fight she is losing men fast, and gaining nothing thereby.

Aifa's forces too are weakened more than the attackers know, and so Aifa sends a messenger to Skatha, challenging her to single combat, by the outcome of which each force shall swear to be bound.

Skatha would gladly accept, but she has been severely shaken when she was thrust from the earthworks.

"Skatha," says Cuchulain, when he hears of the challenge, "to-day thou hast denied me the best part of the fight, wilt thou not deign to let me stand in thy stead against Aifa?"

"Ah, no, Cuchulain! ask me not that," replies Skatha; "in my might it may be that she would defeat even me; how then canst thou hope to prevail against her in thy yet unfledged manhood? My pupil thou art, but not yet my equal."

"Mistress," said Cuchulain again, "think not that I am puffed up with vainglory or wish to boast myself aught but thy humble pupil, nor have I any doubt about Aifa's prowess, and yet, in my bones I feel it, I may yet do a deed against her and bring her humbled to thy feet."

"No, no, Cuchulain! thou shalt not face this Fury. To my care thou didst entrust thyself, and it would ill beseem me to send thee to thy death. Even now thou standest on Life's threshold, all thy years are before thee and all thy deeds to do. What wouldst thou then? To

fall in my quarrel with all thy deeds undone?—Never!—Think! at Emain Macha waits thy mother Dectera, all her hopes centre in thee, her only son. At the Dūn of Forgall the Wily, waits Emer, thy heart's love; dost thou wish me to go down to my grave with their curses on my head, that thou wouldst so rashly bow thyself to Aifa's sword? "

" All this is very true, oh Skatha! but to my thinking beside the point. Thou art thyself all spent, and, on thine own words, unfit to face Aifa; tell me, can thy men prevail and win their way over yonder frowning earth-works? No! What then remains? Wilt thou bend the knee to Aifa and swear fealty to her as thy sovereign lady? What of the torture, Skatha! and what of the death for all those who have followed thee, myself and Ferdia 'midst the number? Canst thou still deny my right—aye, my right, for mine own life and the lives of those I love hang on the issue—to stand alone and face the might of Aifa? "

" Thou speak'st sooth, Cuchulain, and yet my heart bleeds to let thee go, for full well I know that thou shalt fall in this quarrel, and naught will be gained in the end."

" I think otherwise, oh Queen! and therefore I pray thee tell me,—what is it that Aifa cares for most in all the world? "

" Her arms are much to her," says Skatha, " her pride is more, but most of all she loves her chariot and horses."

" And thinkest thou that she will ride in her chariot to the contest? "

" That depends on where the combat is set."

" Then thou must arrange a far spot for the fight, to which it will be necessary for her to drive, and, moreover, thou must so choose the spot that there is a chasm close at hand."

" Why? " queried Skatha.

" Ne'er mind that now, but so arrange it. Dost thou doubt that she will accept me instead of thee to fight? "

" I have no doubt on that score, for thy prowess is all unknown to her."

“ Good! Then let it stand so. I go to rest now in preparation for the fray.”

As Skatha had prophesied, Aifa gladly accepted Cuchulain as an antagonist, for word of his wonderful skill at arms had not reached her, and, in all fairness it must be said that it would not have deterred her one iota, had she known of it.

Now it chanced that ten miles away over the mountain road was a flat plain among the hills, perhaps an acre in extent, of beautiful green sward, with a glen bounding the only side of it which was not enclosed by hills. It was a lovely sylvan spot, in which one would rather expect to see the fairies dance, than two mortals striving for each other's lives.

This hill-enclosed space was perfectly level, the sides of the glen, all fern besprent, sloped steeply, and at the bottom ran a babbling brook.

Here then it was arranged that the Hero of the Red Branch should give battle to Aifa an hour after dawn on the following morning.

When Skatha went to find Cuchulain to tell him of the arrangements for the fight, she found him sitting with his back against a rock, singing the “ Song of the Sword ” to himself, and going through a show of sharpening the razor edge of his great war blade, which it will be remembered he had received at the hands of King Conor Mac Nessa.

“ Good! ” said he when he had been told all the arrangements, and the spot where the fight would be fought fully described to him; “ now I will eat, and later sleep, and by this time to-morrow all this tale will be told and we shall know the might of Aifa and the strength of Cuchulain, at their true worth.”

When Ferdia awakened Cuchulain the next morning, the sun had just risen above the horizon out of a luminous mist. All around was the feeling of the remote awakening world. From all the near-by trees and shrubs arose the intermittent twittering of birds, their feathered throats emitted myriad sounds, then sank to silence as they drowsed again ere yet the sun had fully roused them. A

cold breath of morning warned the sleepers that not yet should they be abroad before the mists of night were swallowed up in the throat of dawn, when the sun assauged his thirst after the night-long slumber.

On the hill-side where Cuchulain lay, the birds stirred and twittered, but down in the valleys where yesterday's fierce battle had raged, the moist air hung heavy and dank, the only sound the rushing of a torrent below as it fell to join a river. Along the banks of the river bulrushes and reeds stabbed their heads above the mists, like upraised sword points when warriors steal to the attack through the dawning.

Soon an animal stirred far below, moving off, reluctant it seemed, to leave its harbourage of the night. From the river the plop of a jumping fish came clearly up the height, and then a willow-herb mirrored pinkly the rising sun, as he cleft his way through infinite degrees of swimming moisture, reddening the rowans, setting free the floating spiders' webs as the glow of golden primrose gilded all the sky and touched tree branches with loving hands.

The little birds darted from the bushes with violent chatterings as the shadow of a hawk wheeling high from his eyrie, passed overhead.

The silent watching Ferdia stirred to life, and bent to shake Cuchulain.

The sun had warmed the world, and no more sleep remained for him who might sleep sound in earth forever, ere yet the sun had sped his round and sunk to rest again.

"Awake, Cuchulain!" cried Ferdia, "and take thine arms. See, I have made all ready whilst thou didst sleep. Come, rise and eat while the chariots are prepared to take us to the Place of the Glen; already the host has marched, and Skatha awaits thee."

Yawning and rubbing his eyes, Cuchulain sat up, and then as sleep cleared from his brain, came swift the recollection of all that the day should hold for him.

Stripping off the clothes in which he had slept, he rolled in the dew wet grass, and then, opening his bundle,

arrayed himself in the gala clothes he had worn when he claimed the arms of manhood.

First he put on his kilt of blue and his smock of emerald green, and next flung about his shoulders the flaming scarlet cloak and fastened the golden buckle, and then, after strapping on his sword belt, he slung upon his shoulders the buckler of red wood with strange devices of men and animals carved upon the rim, which Cullan had given him.

As he finished dressing and tied a fillet about his brow, Cuchulain sighed, "Would that Laeg were here that I might drive with him behind 'Black Sainglend' and 'the Grey of Macha' to the fight."

Skatha greeted Cuchulain to breakfast, and looked proudly on him as he stood there in the pride of his war gear and gala finery, with the sun lighting up the glory of his face and form.

The meal was a short one, for time was flying and the horses stood pawing the earth impatiently, and so, soon, they gat them to the chariots and drove off to the field of combat.

But what a sight awaited them as they drove on to the plain between the narrow gut of the hills known as the Place of the Glen.

In the centre Aifa strode up and down, tossing up a great war sword while she chanted her battle song in a high clear voice. On three sides of the arena the hills rose steeply, a beautiful sylvan scene ordinarily. To-day they presented a wondrous spectacle, for in place of the rocks, that field of grass seemed to be hemmed in with a solid wall of humanity, rising tier upon tier, Skatha's men barely divided from Aifa's by a narrow line.

Above the dark furs the men wore, their faces showed strange, white and tense, and from above the crowd rose a sweaty, steaming mist, for all had marched far and fast that morning to see the combat.

Here and there could be seen bloody bandages swathing heads and limbs—grim relics of yesterday's fierce fight, and from time to time the sunlight would flash back from steel as a man moved sword or spear in shifting

his position, whilst high overhead, great flights of crows were playing "break-neck" across the cloudless sky.

As Ferdia drove the chariot out from the gorge on to the plain, Cuchulain broke into song, his golden voice ringing back from the rocks as it swelled the notes of the song of "Approaching Victory." A great cheer of welcome burst from the throats of Skatha's men as they saw their champion approach. Aifa ceased playing with her weapons and turned to see this presumptuous youth who dared to face her might.

The cheering dies down as Cuchulain descends from the chariot, which Ferdia drives away. He stands alone, while Skatha walks across the turf to where Aifa stands beside her chariot at the edge of the glen.

"Well met, Sister," cries Skatha, "thou art first in the field to-day."

"Aye, Skatha," replied Aifa with a sneer, "first all days and always. Why dost send this youngling against me? Is Skatha then afraid?"

"Not afraid, Aifa, now or ever, but too spent with yesterday's work to fight with thee to-day; but think not this youngling thou sneerest at will prove an easy conquest. Cuchulain besought me to let him stand against thee, and I have no fears for my champion."

"Bah!" said Aifa, "I hate chastising children."

"Let be, let be," spoke Skatha again; "how is the game to be set, do ye fight within the circle, or bye and large?"

"Bye and large, let it be, so that I have more space to pursue and catch this youngling when he runs."

"Count not too much on the running," mocks Skatha, "Cuchulain is swift of foot—in pursuit of a fleeing foe."

And now Skatha goes back to Cuchulain, and Aifa makes ready her arms.

Cuchulain learns the conditions, and then a hush of expectation falls on the spectators, as it is seen that the opponents are about to take the field against each other.

As he stepped out, Cuchulain unclasped his cloak and made as if to throw it to Ferdia, but, changing his mind, he clasped the buckle again, and went into the arena

with his cloak flowing down from his shoulders, at which all marvelled greatly.

When Aifa had made ready, she strode proudly out into the arena to meet Cuchulain, and so they were set facing each other with some ten or, perhaps, twelve paces separating them, and it was seen that Aifa trembled with fury, for she was incensed, feeling an affront had been put upon her in that she considered Skatha had sent a young boy against her in mockery.

An old man, like a foul grey badger, his gnarled and horny hands locked close about a great stump of blackened oak, stood at the edge of the plain and spoke.

"The young man is beautiful as the sun, but he comes ill armed with two javelins and a sword against so mighty an Amazon as Aifa; moreover, the cloak he has not cast off will hamper him and encumber his limbs."

Now Ferdia stood by and heard the old man speak thus, and he was fearful for his shield-brother, for he too thought Cuchulain foolish not to have discarded that flaming crimson cloak.

For a moment the champions stand gazing at each other with every nerve tense, and then, with a shrill scream, Aifa leaps forward with sword upraised. Quite still Cuchulain stands, waiting passively for the blow to fall; down strikes the sword, and just as it seems about to cleave his skull, he leaps lightly aside, shifting his sword into his left hand as he does so, and, as Aifa rushes past, carried on by her own impetus, he slaps her sharply in the face with his flat hand.

A roar of laughter goes up from Skatha and her followers, and Aifa wheels round, screaming with rage, and rushes at Cuchulain again; again he waits passively, and then as the sword is whirled up for the blow he half raises his own blade to guard his head, and then, seeming to lose all his courage, he turns and flees from Aifa, who pursues him with a triumphant yell.

And now is the turn of Aifa's men to cheer and laugh, as Cuchulain darts hither and thither, always just out of reach of that threatening blade, and ever looking, as it seems, for some way to break through the human wall

which rings him in. Round and round the arena they career, Cuchulain always just sufficiently ahead to keep out of harm; and now he appears to stagger and clutches at his throat as he runs, but a careful watcher would see that his pace does not decrease, if anything he runs faster, and Aifa speeds after him. Suddenly something seems to flame behind Cuchulain; he has loosed his cloak right in the path of Aifa's flying feet, and she, dashing madly on, obsessed by the lust for slaughter, catches her feet in it and crashes headlong to the ground, her sword flying from her hand as she falls. Now Cuchulain whirls round, leaps to where Aifa lies prone, and placing his foot upon her neck, presses the point of his sword against her spine for a second and then stands off from her, his foot resting on the sword which has flown from her hand.

Slowly she rises from the ground, marvelling that she is still alive, and then she looks down at her empty hands and at the great war blade so many had kissed in doom, lying now beneath Cuchulain's foot. And as she looks, her pride is humbled and the great tears course down her cheeks unchecked.

"Aifa," says Cuchulain, "some while back thou didst talk somewhat of running; therefore have I taught thee a lesson. Boast not, oh Queen! and despise not youth!"

Swiftly he stoops and whirls up the great war blade and carries it to Aifa, hilt foremost, and holding it out to her he says:

"Take now thy sword again, and we will finish this matter, for I have shed my mantle and thou hast shed some of thy pride, I fancy!"

Without a word Aifa takes her sword and waits, but she blushes rosy red at the feel of the hilt in her hand again.

Once more they stand and face each other in the midst of the plain, but this time there is no question of flight or subterfuge. Round and round they go twisting and turning, while their feet tear up the turf. Cuchulain rushes in with sword aloft and gives a great two-handed blow, but Aifa catches it upon her shield and takes no hurt. She feints at Cuchulain's head, then sinks the

sword beneath the cover of her shield and sweeps at his legs, and that stroke had been his bane, had he not leaped high in air, striking downwards as he leaps. The sword sinks deep into Aifa's shield and is almost wrenched from his hand, but he recovers it with a fierce tug.

They draw off from each other for a moment, and stand panting.

Aifa rushes in and strikes a mighty blow; down flashes the bright blade like a falling star, and Cuchulain catches it on his shield which is smitten from his hand as he is beaten to his knee. Quick as lightning the blade sweeps again, but Cuchulain guards, and so great is the blow that his sword breaks off with a sharp snap close by the hilt, and he is defenceless—at the mercy of his foe.

Aifa whirls up the great war blade and a hushed sigh of anticipation, almost a gasp, goes up from the watching hordes. Cuchulain sees the sun flash on the descending steel and flings himself sideways, falling on his outstretched hand, while with the other he points behind Aifa and cries in a great voice:

“See, see! the chariot and horses of Aifa have fallen into the glen.”

Aifa stops the stroke and whirls round to see what has befallen her most treasured possessions. Like a flash, Cuchulain is on his feet and springs upon his foe; he winds his long sinuous arms about her neck from behind and holds her fast.

In vain Aifa writhes and struggles, her weapons are of no avail with Cuchulain behind her, nor can she twist free; twice she lifts him clear off his feet as she bends her body forward, and twice he slips sideways and drags her upright again. Then gradually all those watching eyes behold Aifa grow black in the face as her body is bent back and back, until at last she lies, her spine curved across Cuchulain's thigh. Thus they stay a moment immovable; Aifa's lips are drawn back from her teeth in a fierce snarl and her eyes glare defiance up at her foe.

With a movement, so swift that those who watch cannot follow it, Cuchulain bends like a well-sprung bow, and straightens his body upright, and behold! he stands

on his legs with Aifa across his shoulders, her ankles and wrists prisoned within his grasp.

An awed silence greets the deed, and then an outland Dane of Aifa's own following calls across the plain:

"By Scyld Scefing! Beowulf's self could not have done better."

Then babel breaks loose as the conqueror strides across the arena to where Skatha stands. Some cry, "A trick, a trick!" and others, "Bravely done!" Taunts, curses and threats are thrown from hill to hill, as men rise up with hand on hilt and are dragged down again by their more level-headed shield-mates.

At last Cuchulain stops before Skatha amidst the threatening thunders of approaching bloodshed, and flings Aifa to the ground. Then placing his knife to her throat, he calls aloud for all to hear:

"Now, Aifa, yield ye to Skatha and swear peace and allegiance."

"I yield and swear allegiance," Aifa answers sullenly.

"Good! thyself shalt be hostage at Skatha's dūn for the behaviour of thyself and thy tribe."

At this the clamour, hushed a moment to hear, breaks out anew. Skatha's people make the welkin ring with shouts of acclamation, but Aifa's men hurl curses at their foes, and the cry, "a trick, a trick! he conquered by a trick!" rings out from all their ranks. First one and then another leaps down into the arena with blade in hand, but before they can engage, Cuchulain is between the angry warriors, unarmed, his empty hands flung wide.

"Hold!" he cries in a voice of thunder, "Hold! what! have I fought this day to save further bloodshed, only to see the swords redden e'en now in the setting sun? Back to the hills ye men of Skatha, back, I say! Back!—do ye hear me? The man who goes not back answers to me for it."

The men of Skatha withdraw sullenly to the hillside, and now Cuchulain fronts the infuriated mob alone; swords are up, and fists, hairy to the finger nails, are shaken in his face; the reek of their breath comes to

him, as the wall of fierce faces closes in and they shriek at him, "A trick, a trick, ye conquered by a trick."

Then Cuchulain speaks again:

"Well, perhaps I did, but what of the words ye pledged, to let the matter stand as it finished with Aifa and me, and to abide the issue as it might fall between us?"

"A trick, a trick! and now all bonds are broken!" they cry, but Cuchulain goes calmly on:

"And now I stand before ye, all unarmed, because I trust thy word, but, that none may say in years to come that a warrior of the Red Branch Hostel feared to conquer fairly, choose ye the best twelve swordsmen in thy ranks, and I will find one to stand back to back with me, and we twain will battle with the twelve."

The clamour dies down and the men talk amongst themselves.

"Well," says Cuchulain, "do ye agree?"

"We agree," answers that Dane who had compared the boy warrior to Beowulf.

"Good! Then Aifa shall give the signal to lay on, that ye may have no grounds for complaint, and the signal shall be this, Aifa shall cast a javelin into the air and when the point touches the ground, the fight shall commence."

As Aifa's men gather into a bunch to choose their twelve champions, Cuchulain looks around for Ferdia, and seeing him by Skatha's side he goes over to them, and says:

"Well, Ferdia, my shield-brother, what sayest thou to this, wilt stand back to back and take thy chance against the twelve with me?"

"To-day thou hast shewed thyself a man of might, thou Glory of Ireland, and because of the joy of battle I will stand back to back with thee until this fight is fought," answers Ferdia.

"Well spoken, Ferdia," cries Cuchulain, and they walk side by side until they come to the centre of the arena—a splendid pair, goodly to look upon, but ill to meet in battle.

"Thou hast changed sword for axe, Cuchulain," says Ferdia as they walk, "how shall we twain fare in the fight?"

"All fight is good," laughs Cuchulain, "so what matter how the fight shall end. Conquest is good, for that brings glory, and death is good for that brings sleep and rest, and is an end of all."

When they are come to the centre of the arena they stand and discuss how they shall fight; the twelve champions make ready, and meanwhile the hills are lined again with men.

"What now can save these twain?" asks a man in the crowd; "surely must they be of the upper world,* if they conquer in this fight."

"And yet," answered that Dane who had sworn by Scyld Scefing, "they are a glorious pair, none others have these eyes beheld in my world-roving to equal them. They are but younglings, yet Skatha taught them, and the Red Branch brought them forth."

The twelve champions now came forward, some armed with swords, some with javelins as well as swords, and one great fellow bears an axe. As they come, Cuchulain whispers a final word to Ferdia and the shield brethren stand back to back; the champions divide, so that one half face Cuchulain and the other half face Ferdia, and there is a space of perhaps ten yards between the brethren and their foes on either side. Aifa stands ready with a javelin in her hand and calls aloud to know if the fight is set, and then, while all eyes watch her, she draws back her right arm and sends the javelin hurtling on its flight. All heads are turned and all eyes follow the weapon as it speeds humming through the air, but none watch the brethren as they crouch lower and lower, like tigers preparing to spring.

As the spear-head beds itself in earth, the brethren spring into their stride and charge straight at their foes; a shout of wonder goes up, for all men had thought that

* Upper World—i.e., They must be of the kindred of the gods—The People of Dana.—Author.

the two would have stood to face the attack of the twelve. Ferdia's sword clears a path for him while Cuchulain's great axe sweeps in a circle disabling two men as he runs. Another shout goes up when it is seen that both have broken through the lines, and three men are down on the grass; two lie still for ever, but the third moans and tries to crawl away, and now the slayers turn swiftly and charge back towards each other, laying low two more foemen as they pass. Once more they are back to back again facing their foes, but now only seven stand against them, for five are down, maimed or dead, never to fight again.

The whole incident has passed so swiftly that the champions hardly realise the catastrophe that has befallen them, and then, seeing the dead about their feet, they spring forward with a snarl of rage. Two fall upon Cuchulain with their swords, and presently one sinks down, his head stove in as the back of the axe crushes in the side of his face on the return swing; the other stands off to let a spearman take his place. Meanwhile one of Ferdia's opponents has outrun the others; he aims a great blow which carries off half of Ferdia's shield, but not before it has sufficiently diverted the stroke to save shoulder and neck. Ferdia sweeps low at him with the sword and cleaves clean through bone and muscle, severing the leg above the knee.

"These two shape well," cries the Dane, "and methinks the sun will set red on their victory."

Cuchulain stands and mocks his three remaining assailants, for they cannot come at him with their javelins by reason of the great sweep of the axe, held at the full length by those long arms, and they fear to hurl their spears lest they slay their two comrades, even now doing their best to finish Ferdia. They draw off and a lull falls in the fight, while the shield brothers mock the champions; and now javelins are hurled at Cuchulain, but they harm him not, for he has unslung his shield and catches the flying weapons thereon.

The air seems alive with humming spears, but not one of them eludes the vigilance of Cuchulain, who guards himself and dodges with the most wonderful agility,

until even Skatha, who has taught him this feat of arms, marvels at the aptness of her pupil.

Cuchulain's three opponents close in, and simultaneously one of those who stand before Ferdia, shortens his javelin and rushes in, but Ferdia bends his body at the waist to let the spear pass him while he cuts the man down with his sword.

"But one remains, brother," calls Ferdia.

"Three remain," echoes Cuchulain.

The great axe bearer rushes on to Cuchulain, and blows fall like hail; one glances from the rim of his shield, and falling upon his iron headpiece, beats him to the knee. He is up again in an instant, and strikes out at his foe, but his balance is not true, and the blow falls short.

"Ill struck, boy!" cries the great man.

"A good blow makes up for all," shouts Cuchulain, as the axe bearer goes down before a mighty stroke which cuts through shoulder and breast. Then to Ferdia he calls:

"Two remain, brother."

Ferdia is fighting hard and his breath comes in great gasps, but presently he wounds that man who stands before him, and as he sinks down Ferdia leaps round shouting:

"None remain to me, brother."

At this cry the two who stand before Cuchulain turn to flee, and one of them is that envoy who, at Skatha's dūn, threatened to whip Cuchulain at his chariot tail. The shield brethren watch the warriors flying, for the space during which a man may draw three deep breaths, and then after them they speed like greyhounds unleashed. Round and round they race, the brethren being separated in the pursuit. Cuchulain soon overtakes the flying envoy and calls upon him to stand lest he cut him down as he runs. On tears the man, and behind him thunders Cuchulain, who seems to eat up the ground in great strides. At last, the fugitive, finding that, run as he will, he cannot out-distance that relentless pursuer, turns and stands on guard, but it is not Cuchulain's purpose to slay him out of hand.

Dropping his upraised axe head, Cuchulain says:

"Look well at me, fellow, didst boast to whip a boy at the tail of thy war chariot? Now thou standest face to face with that boy, Cuchulain of the Red Branch, as I didst promise thee thou shouldst stand. Now shall be fulfilled the rest of the promise, and I will hew thee limb from limb, oh wind-bag, sometime mouth of Aifa!"

Seeing his fate thus upon him the Aifan envoy rushed upon Cuchulain and cut desperately at him with his sword, but Cuchulain stepped back to let the stroke fall short, and, heaving up his axe gave his full strength to the blow, and so great was that stroke that the axe cleft the man's skull and sank far down into his breast bone.

"All, Ferdia!" shouted Cuchulain in a mighty voice.

"All are slain, my brother," came back the cry of Ferdia from across the arena.

At the end of this fight the cheering came full tail from all sides in admiration of the valour and matchless skill at arms of these two youths; loud and long rose the marching songs as the whole host marched onward through the night to the Dūn of Skatha.

Arrived at the dūn some days later, a great feast was held in honour of Cuchulain and Ferdia, and there, on the high seat across the top of the hall sat Aifa, side by side with Skatha, not as a prisoner, but as an honoured hostage in the place where she must dwell for many months to come.

CHAPTER X

AUTUMN passed into Winter and found Cuchulain still at the Dūn of Skatha. The short days were spent in hunting the wolves, grown fierce and hungry, in the snow; and round the great hearth in the hall the warriors drank deep of nights as they listened to the songs of heroes sung and recited by the skalds.

After the meal one bitter night they called on Cuchulain for a song, hoping as they placed the harp in his hands that he would sing to them a lay of his own great deeds, but this he was unwilling to do.

Gazing into the fire, he picked thoughtfully at the strings for a while, his head bent as if listening. Presently he lifted his head with a jerk, a little tender smile about his mouth as the instrument vibrated into life under his hand. Softly swelled the strain, not of war but of love and gentleness in sunny lands; true and clear, the singer's golden voice rang out in the silence of the great hall, bringing tears into the eyes of the women by the fire. Even the rough soldiers, unused as they were to any kiss other than that of axe or sword, hearkened too.

The song goes on, speaking of Mother-quiet and the things of childish days that flutter the heart strings with memories of bygone years. The tender notes sink low telling of lovers' meetings by the cattle byres at dusk; the touching of hands and of glistening hair, desire illimitable born of the first kiss, and the sweet body-warmth of close proximity. The singer speaks of the still content of love fulfilled, and of the ripening mother breasts, in a hushed crescendo.

The rhythm changes, wailing of sorrow and separation, growing to crashing melody of the man fighting for his mate in "the high cause of love's magnificence." The song sinks to silence and silence lives in the room, until Aifa reaches for the harp and begins to sing, and her song is of Cuchulain and his might; with many sidelong

glances at the hero she sings the theme; and that men thought a good song, for Aifa did not shame to sing of Cuchulain's conquest of herself and the chosen twelve; but Cuchulain was not pleased, for those half-veiled, sidelong glances stirred him strangely, and now he bethought him that it was time to set out on his return journey to Emain Macha, yet still he dallied, restless and undecided.

Now it chanced that shortly after the night on which Aifa and Cuchulain sang to the company of Skatha, a wandering soldier came to the dūn, and though they knew it not, he was a forsworn man flying from justice; but Aifa knew him for what he was, and a great love of Cuchulain and a desire to possess him having grown up in her heart, she decided to use the renegade for her own ends.

At this time Skatha gathered her men for a foray, in which Cuchulain was wounded, so that he had to remain within the dūn for many weeks while Skatha and her following came and went about the tasks the new come Spring imposed upon them, and on one such occasion he was left alone in the dūn with Aifa and the women folk.

This was the opportunity for which Aifa had waited. Sending for the fugitive soldier, she instructed him in a certain tale which he should tell to Cuchulain when he came in from the walk he took daily as his strength grew in him anew.

"Nay, lady," said the man, "that were a shameful deed to deceive so a wanderer in a far land."

"Yet if thou canst not tell the tale as I have instructed thee," replied Aifa, "the unthinking silence of eternal night steals down upon thee, for thy story is known to me and shall be known to Skatha too, and Skatha has no place for renegades in her dwelling."

"It shall be even as thou desirest, lady," said the man, adding bitterly, "to run down the hill of honour is easy, but the road to the summit is hard to climb again."

Presently Cuchulain came in from his walk, singing blithely, for his mind was made up to return to claim

Emer as soon as his wound was sufficiently healed to allow him to travel.

In the great hall he found Aifa sitting alone.

"Is time hanging heavy here, Aifa?" he said.

"Nay, Cuchulain, I was but thinking of thee, for I have but just learned that the soldier who came here some days hence is last from Emain Macha." Saying which she rose to pass out.

"Where is this man?" asked Cuchulain, "I would talk with him if thou wilt send him hither."

Presently the man stood before Cuchulain, who spoke to him.

"Well, fellow! so thou art from Emain Macha?"

"Even from the King's Court, lord."

"So! and how fares it with the King, and with my mother, Dectera?"

"Well, lord, both are well."

"And what of Fergus Mac Roy?"

"It was said that Fergus was about to start on a great foray against Queen Maev, but of this I know little."

After a pause Cuchulain questioned:

"Say, fellow, hast heard aught of one Emer, daughter of Forgall the Wily?"

"Aye, lord! Forgall's daughter is wed, wed against her wish to an outland chief from overseas, whence she has sailed with him it is said."

"What?" thundered Cuchulain, springing up, "thou liest, villain!"

"Nay, lord," answered the man, "this I know for truth, for my brother fights in Forgall's train, and he it was who told me."

"Go! go!" said Cuchulain, sinking his head on his hands; "go before I slay thee as an ill-omened tale-bearer."

Cuchulain leant against the wall and groaned.

"Emer false!" he muttered; "Emer false! and now all oaths are broken, all hopes sped, and all my wanderings are vain."

"What ails thee, Cuchulain?" whispered Aifa, gliding up to him, and drawing down his hands between her own.

"Ill news, Aifa; love is sped and false, and all my hopes are naught."

"Sorrow for thee, Cuchulain, such as is my sorrow in the captivity to which thy might hath brought me. Come tell me all the tale," she murmured, as she drew him unresisting to her chamber, but as she passed the women's door, she called for wine to be brought.

As twilight wore to dark, Cuchulain sat in Aifa's chamber brooding on his sorrows and drinking deep of the wine; and ever the woman crept closer to his side, whispering words of consolation and hopes of other love. At last her hand lay within his own and her head rested upon his shoulder; swifter than fumes of wine the scent of her hair rose up to ensnare his brain; her eyes held his eyes as he stretched out his arms to take her to him, and gazed deep into those wanton depths,—but even as his head bent low to drink the waters of desire from her lips, a cold blast, cruel as a knife, passed between them bearing on its breath memory of the words of Fergus at the feast of Cullan:

"Through mighty deeds shalt thou win the guerdon of a beauteous woman's love, who shall cleave to thee so long as life and time do last . . . yet wilt thou prove faithless to thy love 'ere all this tale be told."

With remembrance came loathing of that which he was about to do, for if Emer had proved faithless, yet she had proved faithless not of her own will but rather by force of her father's dominance over her. Why then should he too prove faithless to the oaths they had sworn?

"Nay, Aifa; I wrong myself and thee, 'twere best that we should part and make an end!"

"Ah, stay!" breathed Aifa, her arms about his neck.

"Nay, let me hence."

"Stay, oh stay! Thyself hath said all oaths are broken."

"Yet will I go!"

"Cuchulain, wherein lies the wrong thou speakest of? Thy love is wed, thy hopes are dead; am not I fair as she thou didst love? See, I am straight and tall, fair and well seeming; moreover if we two wed, Skatha will doubt-

less restore my land to me if thou art to rule over it as my husband and my King!"

"Nay, Aifa, this may not be! Truly all oaths are broken, and so henceforth I journey lonely, on all the seas of the world, seeking my doom, so let me hence I pray thee!"

And now guile entered into the woman's heart with the remembrance of a certain love potion which lay concealed within the bosom of her dress, and she stood off from the man her soul desired and her body ached for, saying:

"Go then if thou wilt, thou Glory of Ireland!—and going, drink the cup of friendship at parting, for it is in my mind that soon thou wilt be far away, and we twain may meet no more."

As Cuchulain rose and passed his hand wearily across his brow, she turned aside and filled a horn with wine, spilling the love potion therein as she covered the vessel from him with her body.

Turning again, she handed him the cup and watched him as he drained it to the dregs.

As he drank, Cuchulain felt fire run through his veins, his brain was clouded, and around him drifted waves of soft, seductive music. The room faded from his vision; only Aifa stood before him in the glow of the peat fire, a thing of pulsating, passionate life and love.

For a moment he battled against himself, shutting out the vision of old sin and temptation with his hands across his eyes, but Aifa crept closer, and stealthily drawing his hands on to her breast, murmured, "The past dies, the present is ours, Cuchulain"; her hot lips clung close to his mouth, searing his soul with fire afresh—and he knew no more.

Cuchulain dreamed. In his dream he saw standing over him that figure of Light which had succoured him on the Plains of Ill Luck. The Being looked down with saddened eyes and half-averted gaze, and seemed to say:

"Ill hast thou done, Cuchulain; all oaths are not broken, but thou art forsworn. Shame hath touched thee,

and heavy shalt thy punishment be; one son alone shalt thou have—a glorious boy, but he shall pass from thee on the wave of thy battle fury.”

Thrice did this dream haunt his sleep, and each time he groaned aloud, and the third time turned and woke, and, Lo! beside him lay Aifa. . . . He looked upon her beauty and upon the smile of evil content which wreathed her sleeping lips, whereon he had wasted his soul and lost his honour. Loathing of himself and of her entered into his heart, and with an anguished cry he sprang from the couch. Aifa woke at the sound, and gazed with fear on his wild, remorse-stricken countenance.

“Oh,” cried Cuchulain, “what hath befallen, what didst thou drop into the cup of friendship that has destroyed all friendship for ever?”

“Nay, Cuchulain, naught matters,” answered Aifa, her hair about her face. “None need know of this, and soon we may take the oaths within the doom ring.”

“Rather would I lay across the doom stone with the holy adze above me poised to strike out my life, than by thy side again, thou light o’ love,” cried Cuchulain, shaking with fury.

Aifa heard and grew pale. On one throw had she staked all and sold her soul to gain this man. Fearfully she gazed at him under her lashes, and then spoke.

“Not so easily are the bonds between us to be severed, Cuchulain! With sin I bought thee, and by sin I hold thee! Will Skatha smile to hear that her champion hath defiled her hostage?”

“No greater evil canst thou work than hath been done already, and cannot be undone,” answered Cuchulain, and passed thence into the hall, where he sat brooding, over the dead embers of last night’s fire.

Months passed and at length a son was born to Aifa, and him Cuchulain knew to be the son the Being of Light had promised in the dream. At this time a strangeness came upon Cuchulain, and he determined to go a’Viking over the seas to far lands, but before he went, he saw

Aifa once again, and, drawing a ring from his finger, handed it to her, saying:

“When this little one shall be sufficiently grown that his finger fits the ring, thou shalt send him to seek me in Ireland. His name shall be Connla, and thou shalt charge him under geise that he never makes way for any man, nor refuses a combat, nor shall he ever make himself known to man or woman until he hath slain his first foe.”

After this a great dragon of war was made ready, and one day Cuchulain stood upon the sands, the little dulling edge of foam playing about his feet as he talked to Ferdia.

“Thou shalt go back to Emain Macha,” said Cuchulain, “and there thou shalt recite all this matter to the King and to my mother, and beg them, I pray thee, if I come not back from this voyage, as well may happen, to entreat my son kindly when he shall journey to the Court in years to come.”

Of all the great sea fights Cuchulain fought, and all his prowess in far-off lands, and of his conquests at the Olympic games, I have told in another place, so we must leave him as he sets sail with his carles and shield mates, while we journey with Ferdia to Emain Macha.

CHAPTER XI

THROUGH the years when Cuchulain was at the dūn of Skatha, and while he was away sailing the seas, the little maid Deirdre, the daughter of Felim Mac Dall, whom it will be remembered King Conor Mac Nessa had shut up in a tower with his old nurse Levarcam until she should be of a marriageable age for him to espouse her, was growing to a beauteous womanhood, and naturally enough, through years of the closest companionship, the old nurse had grown to love her charge.

Years came and went, and the maid Deirdre had looked on no man save Conor, and yet in her heart she knew that the King was not the mate she would have picked, had she been free to choose for herself.

Now about the time that Cuchulain set sail from the Land of Shadows, a terrible snowstorm swept across the Kingdom of Ulster, and looking out from the windows of the tower one morning, Deirdre saw a great patch of blood, where some animal had been slaughtered in the snow; as she looked, a large black bird, probably a raven, or a crow, flew out of the sky and settled by the bloody patch.

"Come hither, nurse," called Deirdre.

Levarcam came hobbling at the call, and, looking over her mistress's shoulder, queried: "What is it, Sweet?"

"Look at the snow, the blood, and the bird, nurse, for I think it is like them the man would be whom I should wish to wed. His skin should be pure and white as the driven snow, his hair black as the wing of the bird, but the red of blood should form his lips and touch his cheeks. Say, Levarcam, lives there such a man?"

Levarcam thought well before she answered, for she loved the maid above aught else in the world, and would not have her mated with an old man, such as Conor Mac Nessa had grown to be, if she could have her way; and thinking, she bethought her of Cuchulain's cousin Naisi,

who held office in the Court of Emain Macha. At last she spoke.

"Yea, child, there is such an one at the Court, for I think that Naisi, son of Usna, fulfils all the conditions thou layest down, moreover he is a good and upright man, a staunch friend, a valiant fighter, yet very tender withal to women and the old and feeble."

"Oh, nurse! couldst thou not bring this man among men hither that I, who have never seen any man but Conor, may look upon him?"

"The Light preserve us! Deirdre, art not thou already promised to the King, and would he not whip the head from off me if he caught thee fighting and kiting with another?"

"But, nurse, I only want just to look at him," pleaded Deirdre, winding her arms about the old woman's neck.

"Nay, nay, dear, I daren't do it," the old woman said firmly, and so the matter ended for that time, but Deirdre was ever at her old nurse bothering and pestering her to be allowed to see Naisi, until at last the old woman gave in, and said she would see what could be done.

At first Naisi would have nothing to do with the matter, but at last, overcome by an overwhelming curiosity to see the King's affianced bride, he consented to go to the tower one day when the King was away with his Court, hunting.

When Naisi came to the tower Levarcam sent him out through the courtyard into the high-fenced garden where Deirdre was awaiting him.

Spring had come unusually early and the trees were already rich with buds as the young man walked in the garden, which seemed untenanted by anyone save himself; then all in a moment he saw something stir among the trees, and he was face to face with the maiden who awaited him. His heart gave a great leap, and then seemed to stand still at the wonder of her beauty.

As she faced him shyly, startled at his coming, he saw that she was tall and slender, clad in a gown of virgin white, with a rose-hued cloak about her shoulders; this he saw subconsciously, for the witchery of her eyes, great

soulful depths of blue set in a complexion all cream and roses, caught and held him fast; wondrous eyes they were, long and wide, deep-set under straight level brows, and fringed with black lashes; her nose was straight and clean-cut, and her lips, soft and tenderly moulded, seemed made for kisses.

Her elegant little head crowned with raven tresses was set on the loveliest full throat; her waist was round and slender below her deep-bosomed chest and flat back, and when she walked she moved regally like a goddess.

Naisi gave a gasp of wonder when first he saw her, and then stood quite still, feasting his eyes and letting the full glory of her saturate his senses. They stood thus for a space, and then Naisi broke the silence.

"Levarcam told me thou wert lovely, but thou art more than that, for thou art like a goddess, the most wonderful She alive."

And then his mind went all abroad again as she smiled, blushing rosily at his words.

"Wilt thou not sit and talk with me awhile?" asked Deirdre, "for it is lonely here within my garden, and lonelier still inside the tower."

Seated in the shelter of the hedge they stayed and talked awhile, Naisi telling her tales of the great world of which she was as ignorant as a little child. At last he rose.

"I must go now!"

"But thou wilt come again and tell me other tales?" she questioned eagerly. "Ah! say thou wilt come again, perchance to-morrow?"

"Aye, I'll come again," assented Naisi with eyes averted, for already love had begun to grip him, and, although he knew it not, never again would he break the bonds while kisses were sweet and humanity human; for love is life, for of love, life is born and love has power to last beyond the grave long after life is done, and so long as love holds true, neither the winnowing of Death's pinions nor the coldness of the grave has power to desert a lover or to mar the sweetness of kisses culled from the warm softness of clinging lips.

Thus in the garden on that day of early Spring were the lines of fate cast and the hearts of these two young people caught in thrall of each other; meeting followed meeting and love grew apace, although no word of love had as yet passed between them.

One day Deirdre asked :

“ Naisi, if I asked a great boon of thee, say, wouldst thou grant it ? ”

“ I think, Deirdre, that thou knowest there is little thou couldst ask which I would not do to pleasure thee. ”

“ Then take me away from here, ” she pleaded, “ free me from the necessity of marrying King Conor, for my heart turns from this old man. Why should I, who am young and, on your word, beautiful, spend all my youth caged like an animal in this desolate place ? Why should I go to the King against my will as his wife with all the joys of maidenhood untasted ? Say, Naisi, what power has appointed this fate for me that I should be reared specially to wed a King, even if that King did save my life when I was but a little babe ? Better to have died then, it seems to me, than to have been reared to womanhood but to be passed whither I would not go as a common chattel or a beast of burden. I tell thee I hate the life which lies ahead ; rather would I live in a cave on the hillside such as thou speakest of, than reign a Queen by Conor’s side ! I want to be free, free as the birds, free as the air and running water, and to lie out among the musty reek of dead leaves upon a bed of last year’s ferns when I so choose ! Ah, Naisi ! take me away ! take me away ! ”

“ My Deirdre, that may not be, for I am the King’s man, and how may I betray the lord to whom I have sworn fealty with my hands between his hands ? Oh ! ask not this of me ! ”

So the matter passed for that time, but ever when they met Deirdre pressed her request more urgently, until Naisi was soon torn between desire to do his duty as he saw it, and desire to satisfy his own and Deirdre’s longings.

Then came a night when a great moon hung high in the

heavens, sweet flowers scented the garden, and all the world seemed full of the madness of love as these two met, met in the garden and hand clasped hand in greeting; but now the hands clasped and clung together as they walked, and presently Deirdre drew Naisi's arm about her shoulders, and, walking a half pace in front of him, rested her head upon him, her hands crossed over his hand upon her breast as they walked. All the sweet fragrance of her hair mounted up to his brain. Presently they came to a seat upon which they were wont to rest, and by mutual impulse stopped. As they sank down Deirdre turned about and placed her hands upon Naisi's shoulders, looking up into his eyes with eyes of love.

"What ails us to-night my man o'men," she queried; "has the moon caught all our senses, or do we see each other with true eyes?"

"This ails us, I think, Deirdre, that we can no longer hide our love from each other, and this too, I think, that I am very near to doing as thou dost wish and taking thee away with me from this place for ever, if it were not that I have sworn fealty to the King."

"And if thou hadst not sworn fealty, what then?" whispered Deirdre, looking up with a glad, eager light in her eyes, "if thou hadst not sworn fealty, Naisi?"

"If I had not sworn fealty!" cried Naisi, throwing wide his arms in a wild gesture, "if I had not sworn fealty! Why, my dearest, I would come to thee here in the garden, and I would say: 'Heart's delight, why do we tarry here wasting the short life that the gods give us on this earth? Life is short and of the Great Beyond we are ignorant. Why then do we wait? To-morrow night, when all the world's abed, thou shalt steal out from the tower, out here into the garden, where I will be waiting for thee, and over the fence the horses will be waiting with my good brethren ready to help us on our journey or guard our flight if need be. Then we will mount and ride very swiftly, and all the broad world will be before us to choose from, East, West, North or South, what matter, all our lives are before us, naught for thee to dread or think of, for two strong arms wait to fight for thee by day, to

guard thee always, and to cradle thy rest o' nights. Come, my love, let us away and ha' done with the old shams and mockeries we have known! That is what I would say, belovéd, if I had not sworn fealty to the King before ever eyes of mine rested on thy glorious self."

"Ah, my love, my love!" sighed Deirdre, her arms close about his neck, her lips almost touching his, "why not say it now? Life is short and we have only this one life to live and find happiness or sorrow therein! Happiness awaits us, my dear; why not grasp it then with both hands while the chance presents, why break two young loving hearts for the sake of an old man who does not care for Deirdre more than, nay nor so much as, his favourite hound? See, there is no time to be wasted, we fly to gain our happiness and Conor finds another wife elsewhere, if indeed he seeks a wife at all. We need fly but a little way to the first priest who will make us one in his wayside temple, and then we can lie hid here or over the water until the storm be o'er past and Conor is ready to forgive us."

Thus very sweetly she pleaded.

She laid her head on his breast as he made no answer, and then went on very softly murmuring almost to herself:

"The night will come indeed, and why should we not make it our own? I can steal out to thy waiting arms, and thou wilt lift me tenderly into the saddle and then we shall ride out and out into our future; the dawning day shall bring us hope of life's dawn together! Ah, waste not time in thought, my dear."

"Thou—thou wouldst trust thyself to me, girsha?" he questioned. "Thou know'st nothing of the world, how dost thou know thou could'st be happy with me?"

She raised her head from his breast and her trusting eyes looked straight into his eyes of honest grey.

"Listen, Naisi," she said, "the Sages say that children and animals know by instinct whom they may trust; it is further true, as thou thyself hast said, that all my days have been spent within this tower and garden, and therefore my mind is the mind of a child, and my judgment all unsullied by contact with worldly things, and I do

trust thee with all my heart and soul. Moreover, though I be but a child in knowledge, yet in heart and soul I love thee with the love of a woman, and will cleave to thee alone through good fortune and ill, until the fates divorce our bodies in the grave mould."

And now Naisi rose up and walked alone in the moonlight, up and down, up and down, hands clasped behind his back, head bent, while he came to his decision. On the bench sat Deirdre following him with eager, hungry eyes, as he walked, for now she knew that her future trembled in the balance, for once her lover's mind was made up, neither tears nor curses, threats nor prayers would turn his purpose.

High overhead in the sky hung the lover's-lamp—the moon—calm and dispassionate, and yet powerful to make or mar their lives. Would Naisi see her face in the face of the moon, or only the stern visage of duty, wondered Deirdre. Would that fickle Lady of the Night make him gentle-sweet with tenderness of love, or would she suffuse him with the coldness of her light, rendering him strong as steel?

Naisi stopped short in his walk and gazed on the moon, and then his chin sank into the palm of his hand as he mused, staring at the ground. His head came up with a jerk and he squared his shoulders as he strode back to Deirdre, for the decision was made, and she, poor maid, her heart fluttered like a caged bird in her breast and she ceased to breathe, as, with hands caught to her mouth she awaited the momentous word. At last it came; Naisi stopped before her, took her face between his hands so that they looked full into each other's eyes, and said:

"Deirdre, we go hence to-morrow, for if this deed is to be done, it were better done soon, lest Conor have a sudden inclination to marriage, and all our plans be brought to naught."

"It shall be as thou wilt, Belovéd, so that thou but takest me away from here to dwell with thee."

Naisi seated himself and spoke again.

"Listen then, for this is my plan, but thou shalt tell

me if thou hast a better; if not we must abide my rede, for time presses and the space for plotting is all too short.

"This is my thought, that to-morrow thou shalt feign a sickness which will give an excuse for Levarcam to be in thy chamber all day, preparing for the journey, for Levarcam goes with us; then she shall give it out that the tower is to be kept quiet that thy rest be not disturbed, so the serving men and women, having naught else to do, will betake themselves early to bed and thou may'st safely steal out by midnight, then come straight to the bench, and I will be waiting."

"But whither go we from here, and how may we win clear?" asked Deirdre.

"I know not altogether of that matter yet until I have had speech of my brothers, Ainlé and Ardan, but it is my thought that we should make our way past Ard Macha due North to the waters of the inland sea, and there we will lie hid for many weeks with old Levarcam, while my brothers, travelling by night and hiding by day, with all the horses lead the chase away from us even to the Sl. Snaght, where, loosing the horses in those hills, they shall journey East and meet us by the Causeway, whence we can take boat to the land of the Picts, where I hear there is much fighting and profitable service for good soldiers."

Thus, then, was the matter set, and thus indeed did they escape in due course, Ainlé and Ardan travelling with them and the brethren taking service together under the Pictish King, whom they served faithfully and well, daring many mighty deeds in his quarrels; but time came when this King first saw Deirdre. Now he was a foul and lustful man, nor did it trouble him that the object of his desires was the wife of one of his best soldiers; sufficient was it that he, the King of the Picts, did so desire this woman. For this cause the brethren were forced to fly again, taking Deirdre with them. Long enough they wandered until at last they founded a little colony of outland men in Glen Etive at the South-western end of the Grampian Mountains.

All through the years that had passed King Conor Mac

Nessa had made no sign, nor could Fergus Mac Roy, Naisi's bosom friend, send him any word except that the King seemed to have forgotten Deirdre altogether. But the King had not forgotten, indeed his spies in Scotland constantly told him of the wanderings and whereabouts of Deirdre and the brethren.

One day at the Court of Emain Macha the King turned and spoke to Fergus his champion.

"Fergus, it seems to me that the sons of Usna must be tired of wandering in strange lands, and with Cuchulain too away, the true breed of the Red Branch is strangely absent from our Court; therefore it is my thought, to send thee to Scotland, where I hear the sons of Usna are, and to bid them return to our Court, bringing with them Deirdre, and all shall be forgiven and forgotten."

Now Fergus was overjoyed at this saying, for greatly he loved Naisi; moreover, all the brothers were glad to hear that their exile was over when at last Fergus Mac Roy found them in their glen, for secretly they greatly longed to be back in Ireland among their own people. But Deirdre was not pleased, for her woman's heart misgave her of the business, nor did she hesitate to say so, and this was the cause of the first and only quarrel between those twain who had gone gladly into exile together.

"I tell thee, Naisi," said she, "that thou art a fool to be beguiled back to Emain Macha by lying promises."

"Woman, dost dare to say that Fergus, my beloved shield mate through all the years, is a liar?" asked Naisi fiercely.

"Nay, my husband, keep thy temper cool; Fergus is doubtless a true man and a well-meaning, but I mistrust Conor; think, is it natural that he should welcome the hands that have robbed him and put shame upon him by carrying off his affianced bride? More than that, remember, he not only offers a welcome, but goes further and sends his own King's champion to extend it as he would to a reigning monarch of equal standing with himself. No, Naisi! and thou, my dear brothers, be persuaded of me and let us bide here in simple happiness."

Then Ardan, the youngest of the three brethren, spoke:

"It seems to me that that which Deirdre saith may well be true, and yet she hath not thought out all this matter, for if we journey to Emain Macha, our fighting tail from here go with us, and more than all, we travel under the safeguard of Fergus, which no King dare violate."

"Yes," added Airlé, "that is true, and also Fergus hath told us that his sons Illan the Fair and Buino the Red will meet us, when we land, with all his following to escort us to Emain Macha, wherefore it seems to me that we may go safely, fearing nothing."

In this way was Deirdre over-ruled, but still she and the faithful old nurse Levarcam thought ill of the enterprise.

All that the brethren had said was perfectly true, for even King Conor Mac Nessa dared not molest them while Fergus had them in charge; but the King was a guileful man, and right craftily he laid his plans. Conall of the Victories, a great and upright man, he sent on an errand to Curoi, King of Munster, and when he had gone, despatched his own personal attendant Trendorn to summon to his presence the Chieftain Baruch, whose dūn was close to the place of landing, and to him he unfolded his plan, knowing him to be an ancient enemy of Usna the father of Naisi, Airlé and Ardan. Moreover, he remembered that it was geise for Fergus to refuse a feast, and on this he based his plans to separate Fergus from his charges.

When the wanderers landed in Ireland, Baruch met them on the strand and gave them welcome.

"Fergus," said he, "this night shalt thou lie at my dūn, for a feast is prepared for thee within."

"This may not be, Baruch," answered Fergus, "for I have the King's command to bear Deirdre and the sons of Usna safely to Emain Macha."

"None the less it is my thought that thou wilt stay, for thy sons are here to perform thy office and execute the King's command; moreover it is geise for thee to refuse a feast, Fergus."

So Fergus stayed, and all that company journeyed on under the command of Illan and Buino his sons.

Arrived at Emain Macha, the King's guard was drawn up to meet the company and escort them to their quarters in the Red Branch Hostel, to which they were led by Trendorn, the King's body servant; but the King did not meet them, for he sat within his hall sullenly drinking cup after cup and waiting for Trendorn to bring Levarcam before him as he had been ordered to do.

Presently the aged nurse came leaning on a stick and peering about with half-sightless eyes, for she was very old.

"Well, thou ancient hag," snarled Conor, "so thou hast come back, thou who could'st not stay faithful even to the child thou did'st nurse.

"Now tell me, what of the sons of Usna?"

"The sons of Usna are here, oh King," answered Levarcam, "three valiant men, none like them served the King of the Picts, and methinks the King who has them in his train need fear no foe." Thus did the old woman strive to influence the King's mind well towards those with whom she had lived so long.

"And what of Deirdre, woman?" came the next question.

"Deirdre is here, and well, oh King, but not the maid thou knew'st, for she hath grown thin amidst the Scottish mists; moreover the wild life by wood and hill hath aged her much, and care drawn lines on her erstwhile fair countenance, so that now she is like a pricked bladder, or a fair skin drained dry of wine."

This tale she told as she had arranged with Deirdre to do before they left the Glen Etive, if she should be questioned.

For awhile Conor sat drinking and musing on these sayings, and then he bade Trendorn take the old woman away, but on no account to let her return that night to the Red Branch Hostel, and at this Levarcam feared greatly.

Meantime, while Conor was questioning Levarcam, supper had been served in the Hostel and was now

finished for the night; the men-at-arms still sat around the tables talking and drinking, and at the high seat running crosswise of the hall sat Airlé and Ardan, listening to all the tales Illan and Buino poured into their ears of that which had happened at the Court during their absence, but Naisi and Deirdre were not with them, for they had already retired to an upper chamber, where they sat playing chess, as had been their custom when they dwelt in the Glen Etive and time had hung heavily on their hands.

After a while Illan, the elder of the sons of Fergus, rose from the table saying he must make the round of the sentries as the guard was now set for the night; when he came to the great gate, he found the sentry in converse with Trendorn.

"Well, fellow, what dost want?" asked Illan.

"This, Lord," said Trendorn, "to see Deirdre for a moment, for Levarcam, her old nurse, hath been of a sudden stricken with illness and would see her mistress, for she is like to die."

Now Illan saw Conor's hand in this and did not believe the tale, wherefore he said to Trendorn:

"None come in or go out of the Hostel this night, neither doth Deirdre leave my charge until my father comes to see her safely and honourably disposed under the King's shadow."

At this saying Trendorn's eyes blazed with anger, for he had the King's command to get Deirdre alone to the Court if he could, or failing that, at all costs to get sight of her and report as to the truth of the tale Levarcam had told. It was now certain that he would not get into the Hostel that night, for Illan stayed to see him well clear of the place, but Trendorn did not go far. Once without the circle of light thrown by the great guard lantern which hung and guttered in the gateway, he stopped, and, leaning against a tree looked up at the Hostel set upon its mound. For a long time he stood thus thinking, and subconsciously his eyes fixed themselves on a lighted window, as the eyes are bound to do when light shines out through the darkness; and as he looked he wondered

who might be within the room, and wondering, fetched a ladder that would enable him to look through the window and satisfy his curiosity.

Alone in the chamber Deirdre and Naisi sat playing their game of chess, heads bent over the board as the moves were worked out with deep thought. To them entered a serving maid bearing a tray of wine and cakes, but as she pushed aside the curtain across the portal and entered, her gaze was arrested by a fierce white face with starting eyeballs glaring in through the window. With a scream she let fall the tray and stood stock still with arm outstretched pointing to the casement. At the cry and the crash of the falling tray the chess players sprang to their feet, their eyes following the pointing finger. Deirdre stood like one frozen, her head turned back over her shoulder, but Naisi reached out his hand, and feeling it rest upon the White King on the chess-board, he picked up the piece and hurled it with all his might at that malignant face.

With a horrid scream the face vanished as if an unseen hand had jerked the man violently from his perch; on top of the scream came the crash of a falling body followed by the sound of running feet.

"That one is gone at any rate," said Naisi, "but I am greatly feared that thou wert right, Deirdre, and we had done better to stop in Glen Etive, where, at all events, we were free and not spied upon in our privacy."

"That which is written, comes, husband," said Deirdre sadly, "but I fear that we shall lie in each other's arms no more, for in the maiming of his body servant, for the face at the window was that of him who brought us hither, Conor may find excuse to work his will upon us. Before the Light shines again many shall go beyond the Light to dwell with the Heroes, carried hence on waves of blood."

Naisi turned to the serving maid, who still stood within the portal as one dazed.

"Go to the hall, woman, and bid Illan, Buino and my brothers come hither."

When the sons of Fergus and his brethren came, Naisi told them of the happening, that they should be prepared

for aught that might chance, after which the sons of Fergus returned to the hall, but his brothers Naisi kept with him, saying:

"We are under the protection of Fergus Mac Roy, and it would cast a slur upon his honour and that of his sons, should we appear to take any part in this matter; also those of our men who are within the hall must be withdrawn. Thou, Ardan, go and take them behind the hostel to the rising mound by the door where the river flows by on the one side and the ground slopes away sharply on the other. On no account must thou move from that place until we come to thee, for if things run amiss, it is there that we will make our last stand."

Into the room where King Conor Mac Nessa sat, still drinking sullenly, burst Trendorn the spy, a horrible sight with his bloody face and one eye burst from its socket, where the chess-man had struck him.

The King laughed cruelly at the sight, but Trendorn did not heed as he cried out:

"I have looked upon her, oh King, and but that Naisi hath struck out my eye, even now had I been gazing on the loveliest woman in the world."

At this Conor sprang to his feet shouting for his guards.

"So," he muttered, "that old hag lied to me after all," and then turning to the Captain of the Guard he commanded, "Go thou to the Red Branch Hostel and demand of the sons of Fergus that they deliver up to me Naisi, Ainlé and Ardan, charged with maiming my messenger. If they will not deliver them up, then take the sons of Usna by force and hale them before me."

The Captain saluted and went with his men to the Red Branch Hostel, demanding audience of Illan and Buino.

"Deliver up to me the sons of Usna," said he, "for they have maimed and shamefully illused the messenger of the King, and to the King must they answer for it."

"Ho, ho!" laughed Illan, "what sort of messenger was this, who, being refused entrance by the door, tried to creep in like a thief through the window? Go back to King Conor Mac Nessa and say that the sons of Fergus Mac Roy deliver not up the sons of Usna nor Deirdre,

the wife of Naisi, to any man until their father comes from the dūn of Baruch on the morrow."

Now the Captain of the Guard was a crafty man, and as he went he whispered certain words to the Captain of the Gate who was in Conor's pay, that he should let them into the Hostel at a pre-arranged signal. Then he went back to the King bearing his message, while the sons of Fergus returned to the hall, where they sat down again on the high seat.

Nothing happens for a while, and then suddenly without warning armed men burst into the hall led by the sons of Conor, Princes of the Red Branch. In a moment the fight is fierce; Illan and Buino leap down from the high seat as the great table running along the length of the hall is overturned. In the first rush the fire is scattered and the blue bitter smoke of wood begins to fill the room; stools and chairs are broken and benches lie scattered about the floor ready to trip the feet of the unwary.

The smoke swirls and the ashes dance in the air as the attackers press on over the fallen benches, shouting as they come, to where the fighting tail of Fergus Mac Roy stand behind the overturned table, their backs to the wall, prepared to sell their lives dearly.

The attackers press on, but the long swords of Fergus' men rise and fall, keeping clear the space in front of them; the fight seems to last for hours in the smoke-dimmed hall. Illan is fighting fiercely with an axe, until presently his hands are lopped off on the edge of the table by Conor's eldest son, and the younger hacks his head from his body as he falls. At this a great shout goes up as the attackers run up and down in front of the table, striking as opportunity serves. Then they fall back as the King himself pushes forward through the press.

"Ho! is this the way thou dost obey thy King's commands, sons of Fergus?" shouts Conor.

"We hear the King and we obey," replies Buino, "so long as those commands touch not the honour of our father or ourselves; but Illan, alas, is sped, so thou must treat with me alone, Conor."

At this word "treat," the King smiles, and then he

shouts to his men urging them on. The floor shakes under the rush of their feet, they leap upon the table but are hurled back or pulled down and butchered in the gloom on the floor between the table and the wall. They draw off, but fresh troops pour in through the doors and windows; the fight closes in again, the leather jerkins creaking above the heaving breasts of the tired defenders, and steel falls on armour with rhythmic unceasing clang. The edge of the table is all cumbered with the corpses that lie across it, shifting weirdly as the thirsty, unheeding swords, powerless to harm them further, fall upon them from time to time. Still the fight goes on, wood splintering to the crashing fall of the axes as strokes are missed or turned aside; many of the torches have been knocked from their sconces around the walls and the place is almost in darkness.

At last the King cries: "Hold! thou didst speak not long since of my treating with thee, Buino; come out therefore and we will consider this matter, for my arm grows weary of slaughter."

All the while this fight had been raging in the hall, Naisi sat quietly overhead making a pretence at playing chess with his wife, although his hands itched for the fray, and Airlé moved discontentedly about the chamber, drawing a sharp breath and feeling for his sword each time the sounds of combat rose higher. At last the tumult of battle ceased altogether. Presently an aged warrior, who had fought in Fergus' following all his days, crept to the door, smothered from head to foot with blood—his own and others, for he had sent many souls on the long road that night and was himself bleeding from a dozen wounds.

"What news?" demanded Naisi, springing up and oversetting the table in his eagerness.

"Ill news for thee, Lord! Illan the Fair is sped and Buino the Red makes terms with Conor; of Fergus' following but few remain; there is no escape, for the Hostel is ringed round with the King's men, all save the Boy Corps of Emain Macha, who it is said will have no hand in the matter, holding the King shamed as an oath-

breaker; also Conor knows that thou art above, Lord, and has set a guard at the stair foot, holding that he has thee like a rat in a trap!"

And now they seemed in evil case indeed, but Deirdre bethought her of the ladder by means of which Trendern, the King's body servant, had spied upon them.

"The ladder, Naisi," she cried, "quick, the ladder; let us climb down to Ardan and our own men."

First Ainlé crept through the window down the ladder and stood guard at the foot, while Deirdre descended, and then came Naisi, carrying the wounded man over his shoulder. Him they laid down in a safe place, and then together stole round under shelter of the bushes, which surrounded the Hostel, to where Ardan and their men were assembled. Here they waited, nor had they long to wait, for a cry of rage soon told them that the attackers had searched the upper chambers and found the prey had flown.

Ardan had caused the door behind them to be blocked with great boulders, so their rear was safe. Now Naisi formed his men into a double half-circle, their left resting on the swiftly flowing river by which it was protected, and their right against the Hostel wall where the ground fell steeply away. Deirdre they placed in the centre of the ring, while the brethren, armed with axes, took their stand in the forefront of the semi-circle.

Soon King Conor came into sight on the other bank of the river and saw those two frail lines awaiting him, perhaps a hundred men against the three hundred who backed him. For a moment his followers regarded the ring of death in silence; then up the mound surged the charge, the battle joining on the crest with an impact like waves beating on a rock-bound shore. For a moment the opposing lines held fast, locked in a deathly embrace as the soldiers hewed and hacked at each other, breast to breast, and above the din of battle, the triple sound of the axes of the brethren falling, can be heard, and there is something unnatural, awesome about blows falling so fast, for the sons of Usna were mighty champions with wondrous skill at arms.

The double ring bends inwards and then expands again as the foemen are flung back like spume where the waves have beaten out their force on unyielding rock. And now the fight hangs in issue; Naisi sees the new attack gathering, and with a shout heaves up his axe.

"Follow, comrades, follow!" he yells; "death or victory waits."

"Usna, Usna!" roar his brethren as they leap forward at his side, and behind them charge the fierce Irishmen and Picts who made their fighting tail.

Before that charge the men of Conor broke and fled, and then the victors came back to where Deirdre was standing watching by the door, perhaps thirty of them all told, bloody, weary, and wounded, but with the light of victory in their eyes.

"What now, brother?" queries Ardan as he looks at Naisi; "we cannot break through, or, breaking through, have no place of safety to which to fly."

"Do we fight here to the death, brother?" asks Ainlé.

"Here we fight until the end," says Naisi; "the fight has been good, and death ends all in sleep."

At this saying the wild men cheered and said they were ready to die for such leaders, and that the lady Deirdre should not fall into the hands of Conor Mac Nessa alive.

And while they waited and looked down on the mound by Creeveroe's bloody gate, Conor was making a plan, but whether, as some say, he induced Cathbad the Druid to call up a sea of slime by his magic arts, or whether he dammed the river, I know not, but presently the muddy waters began to rise until they swirled about the legs of the waiting thirty, and it seemed that the slime entangled their feet, so that no man could move from where he stood; but Naisi, casting away his axe, caught Deirdre up and held her aloft on his shoulder with his left hand, while in his right there flashed a short sword.

Then there happened a wonderful thing, for although the thirty could not move their legs, the soldiers of Emain Macha walked unhindered through the flood while Cathbad stood afar off with arms outstretched, and there they

butchered all that company until the place looked like a shambles; but the sons of Usna they would not touch, holding them to be brave men who should be allowed to go free for their deeds' sake. So Conor bade take and bind them, swearing a terrible oath by the Light above him that no hurt should befall them. Thus it was done, and the sons of Usna were carried to the Court of Emain Macha, but Deirdre clung to Naisi, nor would the soldiers tear her from him by force, as Conor ordered.

Into the great hall of Emain Macha, where the high feasts were held and justice dealt, the prisoners were carried. Conor dismissed the guards and servants, keeping only certain of his nobles with him. Turning to his sons he said: "Come, strike off the heads of these men and let us end the matter."

"This we will not do, Sire!" the elder boy answered boldly. "This night we have slain Illan the Fair, our friend, in honest fight at thy command, but we soil not our blades with the blood of helpless prisoners."

"Buino," said the King, "do thou the work; thou hast been well paid to betray them. What price dost ask to slay them?"

But even Buino the traitor would not do this shameful deed.

Then the King called upon noble after noble to dispatch the sons of Usna and make an end, but all refused to obey him; indeed one scarred old warrior of many fights told Conor straight to his face that he had done ill to break his oath once already, and evil would come of it, and none of them would aid him to break his word a second time.

At last the King bethought him of the Prince of Ferney, and because this prince was an evil liver and a loose man, the King sent for him to do the deed.

"Owen Mac Darucht," said he "wilt thou slay me these three rebels?"

"Aye, Lord!" growled Owen, "a service for a service. I pay court to the maid Emer, and if thou wilt forward and aid my suit, then will I strike off the heads of Naisi and his brothers."

On this King Conor pondered deeply, for he knew that

Cuchulain sought to wed with Forgall's daughter, but knowing Cuchulain's tale from Ferdia's lips he found ground for forsaking the absent hero. Anyway, Cuchulain was over seas and might not return, but Naisi and his brethren were here, and once let free would rouse the land on him, so he at last agreed to Owen's condition, whereat Owen went over to where Naisi lay bound, and stooping over he dragged the sword from its sheath at the bound man's side; but Deirdre, seeing his purpose, flung herself upon her husband's breast, covering his prostrate body with her own. Owen spurned her aside with his foot and swiftly cut off the head of Naisi, and then those of his two brothers, while the King picked up the swooning Deirdre and carried her into his chamber.

Next morning Fergus Mac Roy rode in just before noon from the dūn of Baruch; everything seemed strangely quiet in the precincts of the King's house; those he met greeted him hurriedly and walked away as though anxious to avoid conversation. Much perturbed at this strange welcome, he dismounted and threw his reins to a horse-boy who came up to take his animal. Walking into the great hall, usually thronged with chiefs and nobles at this hour, he found it absolutely empty, and then as he paused to see if anyone would come, he came face to face with Ferdia entering through the door leading from the King's apartments.

Ferdia had not long since ridden in from his home, and now his cheeks flamed and his eyes flashed as he slapped his leg with his whip and muttered savage curses under his breath.

"How now, Ferdia?" called Fergus. "Thou seemest out of temper this bright morning."

"Out of temper is it?" cried Ferdia. "Where are ye, Fergus? Here am I back at Court to greet Cuchulain, who returns to-day, and Conor, the black curse on him, has brought the worse shame on us all."

"Have a care, Ferdia; how thou dost curse the King in my presence, for remember I am King's champion still."

"King's champion are ye," laughed Ferdia bitterly.

"Well, it is my thought that the office will soon be vacant, for long have I known Fergus, but never known him nidding, and that thou shalt be called, Fergus, if thou too dost share this shame."

"Come, come, lad, tell me the trouble," said Fergus kindly; "perchance 'tis not so ill but we can mend it between us."

"Mend it, is it? Well, perchance thou may'st if canst work miracles and make the dead arise, for know, the sons of Usna are dead, Deirdre made a wanton by the King, and of thy sons, one is dead and the other a—traitor, having betrayed his trust for a grant of great lands and many cattle from the King's hand."

"Now by the blood of sacrifice," shouted Fergus, "thou art surely mad, for such things cannot be, or if all else be true yet could mine own flesh and blood never prove false to a trust."

"Yet it is true, Fergus, and Buino is that traitor's name." And then Ferdia set out all the doings of yesternight as he had heard them from those who were present but who would have naught to do with the slaying of the sons of Usna.

"Let us go hence," said Fergus wearily, "and presently I will speak with this King who sits upon the throne which is mine by right; but first we will eat and array ourselves to come before the King when he sits at the hour of justice in the great hall."

Throughout that day Fergus and Ferdia sought everywhere for Conall of the Victories, but they did not find him, for as has already been told, he had been sent on a mission to Curoi, King of Munster, on which he would be absent many days. When the afternoon wore away to the evening and the hour of justice, the hour at which the men returned from the day's work, approached, these two put on their battle armour, and taking with them their weapons of war, went to the great hall. When they entered, the full Court was assembled. The King was seated in the Chair of Sentence, Cathbad the Druid was on his right, and the executioners knelt on either side at his feet. Chieftains were ranged in a semi-circle behind

him. In the body of the hall the people were assembled to hear the cases, and by the door in groups stood those who sought the King's justice, a large concourse, for Conor Mac Nessa, whatever his faults may have been, was a just and famous lawgiver.

The King looked up as the new-comers entered, saying:

"Welcome, Fergus, take thy stand in the champion's place behind my chair."

"Not yet, oh King," answered Fergus. "What of the sons of Usna, and what of Deirdre, Naisi's wife? For strange tales have come to me of thy dealings with those who were placed in my charge, and who committed themselves into my care under thy safe-conduct."

"What is this to thee, Fergus? I exercise the High Justice and the Low, and over all I hold the law of Life and Death. Those who were committed to thy care thou didst desert and they passed into my hands to do with as I chose. Say, Fergus, art satisfied?"

"No! by the blood," thundered Fergus, "for now I hold thee no right King any longer, but a forsworn man, an oath breaker, a stealer of other men's wives; niddering, I name thee, Conor Mac Nessa, for thou did'st fail to take the sons of Usna in fair fight, but first did'st bribe my son, on whom be the black curse; may the black blight fall upon him and rot his bones; may he neither eat at board nor lie in bed; may his heart bleed drop by drop in his breast with never a one to comfort him; may he beg his bread from door to door and die at last in a ditch like the dog he is; and may the black curse fall upon thee too, King Conor, and thy brain rot within its dwelling or swell until at last it bursts out, for not only did'st thou bribe Buino to shame, but after, when thy men prevailed not against the might of the brethren, thou did'st take them by a trick, having sworn no ill should befall them, and at the last, fearing to slay them with thine own hand, did'st make a shameless pact with Owen to do the deed unthinkable. But wait, Conor, wait, Cuchulain comes, and meantime I go to raise fire and the sword of vengeance."

"Aye! and I go with thee!" cried Ferdia.

"Kill me these men, or take them living for the torture, I care not which," screamed Conor, rising up with arm outstretched, his visage black with rage.

Fergus and Ferdia ripped out their swords and stood on guard with shields up, in the centre of the hall just where the light struck full upon them. Now some cried one thing and some another, but still none came on to take the twain, although swords were out and up on every side.

"Obey my orders, fools," raved the King, and still no man moved except the two, who moved slowly back to back down the hall, and out by the door, and just as they passed out the King seized a javelin from the hand of a soldier and hurled it at them so that it stood quivering in the lintel of the door; but only a mocking laugh came from without the portal as the two mounted their horses and rode away to seek fresh service and to raise that sword of vengeance of which Fergus had spoken.

CHAPTER XII

Now Cuchulain came not to Ireland that year, as had been expected, for it chanced that his ship was driven out of its course by a mighty storm and wrecked upon an unfriendly shore, where the hero was made prisoner with all his men, and dwelt in captivity for a full year.

During that year in which Cuchulain lay in bondage things went not well in Ireland, for Owen urged his suit continually upon Emer, and Forgall was bought over to sink the blood feud he held with the Red Branch House and to give his consent by a promise of great gifts from the King, to be made on the day the wedding should be celebrated. Moreover, Owen had a boon companion named Lewey, son of Curoi King of Munster, and he it was who poured tales into Emer's ear of Cuchulain's dealings with Aifa, for he had been at the dūn of Skatha when that matter befell; and he hated Cuchulain, being jealous of him. Thus was Emer's mind poisoned against her lover, but as yet she would not consent to the wedding with Owen, although each day she was importuned on every side to agree.

Meantime Conall of the Victories had been sent a'Viking over seas while Fergus and Ferdia had ridden South into Munster to try to raise Curoi and his men against Conor Mac Nessa, but Curoi would have naught to do with the matter, saying the quarrels and feuds of the North were no affair of his; but the real reason he refused was because he knew his son Lewey to be Cuchulain's foe. So Fergus and his companion rode North again to Rathcroghan,* where Ailell lived with Maev his wife, ruling over all the land of Connacht.†

And there they were made welcome, for Maev, who

* Rathcroghan is in Roscommon.

† Now known as Connaught.

ruled her husband, and through him the land, cared naught for Ailell but ever sought fresh lovers, and in the mighty champion Fergus Mac Roy she foresaw fresh conquest, nor did Fergus hesitate to play that part too, to further his own ends.

At this time it happened that Ailell and Maev had had a great quarrel as to the merits of their respective herds of cattle.

"At least," said Ailell, "I have the famous bull Finnebach, who has never yet stayed in the possession of a woman."

"Mac Roth," said Maev to her steward, "is Finnebach indeed the most wonderful bull in the world?"

"Almost, lady, but not quite," replied Mac Roth, "for there is the Brown Bull of Quelgny which I consider to be an infinitely better animal."

Maev said no more at that time, but she caused enquiry to be made as to the whereabouts of this wonderful beast, and resolved in her own mind to possess herself of him by fair means or foul. It mattered little to her which, for Queen Maev was a strange, wild woman, acknowledging no will but her own, and no need but her desires. In person she was tall and fierce-looking, with a long, pale face and a mass of yellow hair above fierce, steely-grey eyes. Terrible tales were told of her treatment of disobedient slaves.

Having recently heard that the Brown Bull was to be found in Ulster in the hands of Dara Mac Fachtria, Maev was inclined at first to view the advent of two Ulstermen at her Court with some suspicion, but on learning their errand she welcomed them openly and straightway began to question Fergus as to the Brown Bull, and he told her that indeed it belonged to Dara and was still at Quelgny,* but he also told her of the wonderful might of the Ulstermen in war, and pointed out that it would be useless for her to go up to take the Brown Bull if she was supported only by the Connacht men. Maev freely acknowledged this, and so she sent envoys of peace to Dara Mac

* Quelgny is in County Down.

Fachtria asking him to lend her the beast for one year. In payment of the Bull's services she was willing to give to Dara fifty-five heifers which he himself should choose from her herd, and she bade the messengers make a solemn promise to return the beast to him at the end of the year. In case this proposition should not please Dara she bade the envoys tell him as an alternative that she would give to him an estate and lands equal to his holding in Ulster, together with a chariot worth the price of a score or more women slaves if he would come to Connacht to dwell under the cloak of her protection, and allow the Brown Bull to pasture with her herds.

One of these offers Dara would surely have accepted, in which case Fergus' plans would have been brought to naught, but Fergus knew Dara for a proud and stubborn man, and, to prevent him accepting Maev's overtures, he sent a trusty serving man of his own to Quelgny, bidding him urge Dara to accept Maev's offer lest a worse thing befall, as it was well known at the Court of Rathcroghan that Maev would raise her host and take the bull by force should Dara be foolish enough to refuse to lend it or to come himself and dwell in Connacht.

In this way did Fergus frustrate the hopes of Queen Maev, for, as he had anticipated, Dara, who had at first entertained the envoys and accepted their advances well, saying that he would give an answer which he trusted would please them in a month's time, dismissed the men of Connacht directly he received Fergus' message, bidding them say to their mistress that the Brown Bull was named the "Brown Bull of Quelgny," and that both the beast and his master were well content to live in their present home, but that if Maev wanted the Bull she knew where to find him and might come and fetch him—if she could.

At this reply Maev was furious, and swore to nail Dara by the ears to the door of the Bull's stall; but Fergus was pleased, for things were falling out as he desired, and in the end, the outcome of his careful planning was the sending out of messengers South, East and West to raise the men of Erin to a great hosting against the men of Ulster. At this time too, Ferdia left Rathcroghan to

summon his following of Firbolgs, but many months must elapse before the negotiations between Connacht on the one hand and Munster, Westmeath and the High King's territory in Meath, and the others, whom Maev wished to aid her, could be completed; and after the negotiations were finished more time must pass before she could take the field at the head of eighteen triucha cét*. Meanwhile, before all these matters were settled, and the preparations complete, Cuchulain came home.

Now it were too long to tell of all the deeds of Conall of the Victories as he sailed the seas, knowing nothing of the rape of Deirdre or the slaying of the sons of Usna, but for the sake of the story it must be told that in his voyaging he came to the island where Cuchulain lay in bondage, and, learning of his comrade's plight, attacked the house of the King by night, and, putting all there to the sword, carried off Cuchulain and all his following—Greeks, Romans, Nubians and fierce Northmen from Danemark, whom he had gathered to him in his wanderings overseas. Nor was the ship of Conall large enough to carry so great a company, for the fighting tail of Cuchulain numbered nigh on three hundred men, so they took the two great sea serpents that had belonged to the King of the Island, and in them put to sea with Conall.

About this time, when Conall and Cuchulain were setting sail from the far island, King Conor summoned Forgall the Wily to Emain Macha.

"Forgall!" said the King, "it is my most earnest wish that the wedding between Owen and thy daughter Emer be celebrated before the coming of the New Year."

"Well, lord!" replied Forgall, "for my part I desire naught better, but the maid is still obdurate, and it is my thought that she will make an ill mate for Owen if he weds her against her will."

"Still, maids have been wed out of hand against their fancies before now, and yet have been well enough suited in wedlock ere all the tale was told," said Conor, and then added, "say, Forgall, is there aught I can do to aid

* A triucha cét consisted of 3,000 men.

matters; is there aught, for instance, *thou* desirest, which it is in my power to give?"

"Aye, lord!" growled Forgall, "give to me 'Black Sainglend' and 'the Grey of Macha,' together with Cuchulain's war chariot, and, willy nilly, Emer weds Owen before the New Year comes."

At this saying the King was sad, for his son Follaman held the horses in trust for Cuchulain, whom he loved; nevertheless he consented, for many champions, among them his son Cormac, had deserted him after the slaying of the sons of Usna, and he feared lest Owen Mac Darucht, too, should take service elsewhere if he were thwarted in his purpose of marrying Emer.

As it so happened this conversation between Conor Mac Nessa and Forgall the Wily, took place, not in the great hall where the King was wont to grant audience to his subjects, but in a little chamber, the window of which looked out upon the courtyard, and under this window Cuchulain's charioteer Laeg was sitting in the sun polishing a bit, so that he heard all that passed within. When he heard the King accede to Forgall's request, he rose up and strode quietly away to the stables, for he knew that of all his possessions, his master loved best his chariot and horses.

Harnessing "Black Sainglend" and "the Grey of Macha," he hooked them in to the chariot and drove out of the yard, saying to a stableman as he did so:

"I go to exercise the horses of the Lord Cuchulain."

When the King and Forgall came to the yard they thought nothing of this, for it was customary for Laeg to exercise the horses daily, but Laeg had no intention of returning. Instead, he drove steadily on through the day, only stopping at night to obtain food and fodder for himself and the animals from a *bodach*,* and then pressed on to the north-east, where he purposed hiding his charges in one of the many caves along the coast until Cuchulain should return; and if Cuchulain returned not, well then he would take the horses to his master's bosom friend,

* *Bodach* means farmer.

the Lord Ferdia Mac Daman, as he knew Cuchulain would wish.

* * * * *

The voyage home from the Island of Bondage was a long one, but time passed, and at last the shores of the Emerald Isle hove in sight—imagine how the wanderer's heart beat at the first vision of his native land!—Cuchulain gazed and gazed, nor could he look his fill, and then his heart gave a great leap and almost stopped, for there, along the top of the cliff, raced two splendid horses, drawing a great war chariot, and Cuchulain knew them for his own even at that distance.

The ships sailed into the little bay with a following wind; sails were lowered, men sprang down into the water as the keels ground on the sands, and willing hands ran the boats up the strand and beached them.

Cuchulain leaped overboard among the first, and walking up the beach, stooped and passionately kissed the soil of his beloved native land, even as did a King of England hundreds of years after Cuchulain's flesh had dropped from his bones in senseless dust.

Then, while Conall saw to the clearing of the war ships and the mustering of the men, Cuchulain climbed alone to the top of the cliffs, where he found Laeg breathing the horses after their gallop.

Laeg looked on his master for a moment speechless, and then, with a mighty shout, which sent the seagulls squarking and circling on high from the rocks where they were just settling down for the night, he rushed forward and fell at Cuchulain's feet, muttering incoherent words of welcome.

"This is well met, Laeg," said his master as he stood fondling the silky muzzles of the horses; "but what chance of luck brings thee to this desolate spot?"

"The best of luck for thee, lord, else hadst thou never driven 'Black Sainglend' and 'the Grey of Macha' more, for King Conor had already promised them to the Lord Forgall; but I, overhearing the pact and knowing full well that Cullan gave the horses to thee, and to no other to

sell or barter, harnessed up and drove away, and here have I lain hid these months past."

"Now by Dara, why should Conor give my horses to Forgall unless it is that he may persuade the Wily Chief to hold Emer unwed against my return."

"Ah, my lord, a worse tale hangs to that matter."

Then Laeg set out all that story of the courting of Emer by Owen Mac Darucht, so far as he knew it, but of the rape of Deirdre and the slaying of the sons of Usna he said nothing, for Cathbad the Druid had imposed a geise upon the men of Emania not to speak of this matter.

As the tale drew to its end Cuchulain's battle fury came upon him, and, drawing his sword, he shouted for Conall, who came running swiftly, thinking his friend attacked by foemen, but finding Cuchulain alone with his charioteer, he asked sharply:

"Well, Cuchulain, what's amiss that thou dost summon me thus violently with cries of war and affright in the midst of the setting out of the bivouac?"

"What's amiss?" raved Cuchulain; "what's amiss? Well may'st thou ask, when Laeg here tells me that Owen Mac Darucht pays court for the hand of Emer, and Conor Mac Nessa backs his suit. Worse still, Forgall forces on the match and Laeg heard the King and Forgall set the wedding feast for New Year's Day. To-night is New Year's Eve, and seventy long miles lie between us and the Dūn of Forgall Lord of Lusca. Now ask'st thou what is amiss, or why I rave and shout?"

"Indeed thou art in evil case, Cuchulain, for the men are weary and stiff from the sea, and hardly, I think, could they cover the distance in a week."

"Men!" cried Cuchulain; "what need have I of men? If I can but come there in time for the marriage feast, I can at least strike Owen-the-Maid-Stealer dead, and so save Emer from him, even if I am cut down myself the next instant."

"Then I think, lord, there are those here who will take thee to Dūn Forgall in the time," said Laeg, laying his hand upon the neck of "the Grey of Macha"; "for many

months the horses have rested, exercised, and fed here, until they are fit to race for their lives, as it seems to me they must gallop for thine honour this night."

"The lad speaks truth," laughed Conall of the Victories, joyous for the coming fight; "go Cuchulain, and I go with thee, leaving Old Agnoman to bring on thy men and mine so soon as may be."

Little time is wasted in preparation; a few hurried orders to Old Agnoman, enough food and fodder packed up, and the three mount into the chariot.

As Laeg urges the horses into a sharp canter, Cuchulain looks back over his shoulder and sees the quiet bivouac, the gleaming spear heads red kissed as they stand up, their shafts struck into the earth. The sea beyond is illumined by the fiery rays of the sinking sun, which stains the whole scene red; in the thunder of the hoofs he loses the far-off roaring of the distant breakers.

As they drove on, Laeg again set out, for Conall's benefit, the tale he had told to Cuchulain.

"Ah!" said that warrior, "they work an evil work, and we have seventy miles to go through the night and only these two horses. Well, man can but try, and belike we may yet be in time, or at the worst, unwilling wed may be quickly widowed," and he laughed aloud as the horses galloped on.

The night came down and the moon rose up as they galloped up the slopes of the Antrim Mountains; the horses had got their wind now, and swept along with great raking strides which neither tired nor varied mile after mile.

On through the stillness of the night; the horses' hoofs beat out a ceaseless, rhythmic song of the road, which numbed the brain and set all thoughts at rest. On, under the moonlight, past lonely farmsteads and the huts of hill shepherds; on, over the ridge of the mountains as the moon rose to her zenith; on, on, hour after hour, galloping it seemed eternally through an everlasting night.

None broke the silence, but all three watched the splendid horses and listened to their deep-chested

breathing through the drumming of the hoofs. And so on, and now they were passing down the Southern slopes towards Loch Neagh.

At last Laeg, who for the last few miles had driven leaning forward and urging the horses onward with his voice, stood upright and eased them to a walk, and then signed to his companions to dismount as the chariot came to a standstill.

"Twenty-five miles, lord," said he; "more than a third of the journey done."

They unhooked the horses from the chariot, and took off the harness while the sweat dripped down from the animals' necks and the steam stood up in a great cloud above them, then they let the horses drink a few draws of water, and it was a hard task to get them away from the loch, for they would have drunk their fill. Next, they were allowed to roll in the dew-wet grass and then given a small feed of corn, and all the while Cuchulain wandered restlessly up and down, striking his hands together.

Soon the time was up, the horses were harnessed and hooked in, and the chariot started off at an easy trot.

"Faster, Laeg, faster!" called Cuchulain.

"Nay, lord, leave this matter to me," answered the charioteer; "the horses are not into their stride yet."

"He who hurries too much, falls," said Conall sententiously.

And now they are leaving the Hills of Laggan on their left, and in front stretches the open plain away to Ard Macha, and the horses are into their wide, steady stride again.

On they go, and now only twenty miles remain between them and their goal, but the horses are flagging, and the smell of dawn is in the air; after a while they see the Dûn of Emain Macha dimly through the first light of day far away to the left, as the galloping hoofs drum up the dawn.

CHAPTER XIII

THE hall of the Lord of Lusca, Forgall the Wily, is decked for the marriage feast, and adown the walls on either hand run tables laden with good provender for his retainers and those of King Conor Mac Nessa, Owen Mac Darucht, Prince of Ferney, and Lewey, Prince of Munster. The High Table is set across the top of the Hall, and at it are seated the King, with Cathbad on his right and Forgall on his left. Beside the Druid sit Owen Mac Darucht and Emer, whom he hopes soon to hold as his bride. Next to Forgall sit his elder daughter, Fial, and Prince Lewey, son of Curoi King of Munster.

Emer sits still as a statue in her white robes, her face set and cold as marble for she hates Owen, who sits by her smiling evilly, now that he sees his plans approach fruition; and evilly smiles Lewey, too, for he also had played his part in bringing to pass the sacrifice of the maid. But Emer heeds them not, nor looks upon them, for she is thinking of Cuchulain as she saw him last in all the radiance of his beauty and youthful strength on that day he came to ask her hand. She thinks of him as he stood, his eyes blazing defiance as he swore to do his deeds and come to claim her with fire and sword if need be, in answer to the scorn her father put upon him. She thinks, too, of Cuchulain's reputation; for it was said of him that he never did an ill deed, never refused succour to the weak and needy, nor quarter to a fallen foe who hanselled for peace. All men loved him, and even his foes admired him for his courage and honest nature. Then her mind turned upon the tales Lewey had poured into her ear, and now, too late, she wondered if they were true, for she could not bear to think of Cuchulain faithless and dishonoured.

"Oh that he were here," she said in her mind, "faithless or fair, yet would he not see me go from this place as Owen's wife."

The druid Morann—that same druid who had prophesied at Cuchulain's birth—filled the cups and handed them to the King, that he might name the toasts, for all the guests were gathered by this time.

The feast went on and cup followed cup, and still the bride sat rigid as a statue, suffering no food to pass her lips. At last the feast drew to an end as Cathbad himself rose to pour the marriage cup, which he blessed and handed to Owen, who rose to his feet and all that company rose with him. Taking the cup between his hands, Owen called the toast aloud as was the custom, then, turning, he pledged Emer and drank the half of it before handing it to her, for she must pledge him too and drain the flagon dry.

Around the great cup the bride's fingers were locked, the words of bondage trembled on her lips as she raised it high.

"In this cup I pledge ——" But she got no further, for the thunder of hoofs and the rumble of wheels was heard without, approaching up the road to Dūn Forgall.

The cup tilts forward between the bride's clasped hands, and the wine slops over the rim on to the board as she leans forward gazing intently down the aisle between the tables. It falls to the ground with a crash and rolls away out of sight under the table as she screams and points to the door.

At the cry, all eyes are turned in the direction of the pointing hand, a gasp of wonder goes up, for there, framed in the portal stand two fierce warriors with naked swords in their hands; the dust of travel covers their garments, their faces and bare arms are bronzed as by the sun beating up from the tossing seas, their mouths are set and firm, and their eyes gleam fiercely from deep hollows, black ringed and sunken.

"Cuchulain!" screams Emer.

"Cuchulain and Conall of the Victories!" echo the people.

Owen mutters a curse, but Forgall reaches for his sword and shield, for he remembers certain promises Cuchulain

made long since; King Conor says nothing, for he is shamed that Cuchulain should come in this hour.

"Bar the door against those men who come unbidden to my daughter's marriage feast," orders Forgall; but he is too late, for now Cuchulain and Conall are advancing up the hall side by side, grimly silent.

"Curses on them," raves Forgall; "wilt thou drive them forth or cut them down, or must I needs come down from the High Seat to do the deed myself?"

"Aye, lord, I think that were better," mocks Cuchulain; "but first certain words must be said 'ere we betake ourselves to deeds."

"Wilt thou suffer this interruption, King Conor, before the bride's toast—half drunk already—be completed?" demands Forgall.

But King Conor sat silent, for he was shamed and would take no further part in the matter.

"Well for thee, my Lord of Lusca, that the toast is not yet pledged," cried Cuchulain, "for certain promises passed between thee and me once long ago, of which I now would speak.

"Say Forgall, do my thoughts lie to me, or didst thou once promise a youth named Cuchulain, that thy daughter Emer should mate with him after he had done certain deeds, and if he came to claim her and could take her? Wait, lord," he added, as Forgall was about to reply; "after my time, thine." Then he went on. "And say, lord, did not that youth Cuchulain take thee at thy word, promising to come back and claim the maid, with fire and sword if need be? Moreover, it seems to me that there was some talk of the nailing of ears to doorposts and the stuffing of a certain carcase with straw should the maid be wed. Say, Forgall, hast forgotten those things, or didst fancy Cuchulain would perform less than his promised word? Wait," said Cuchulain again, "thy moment is not yet, nor that of Owen."

Then, looking Emer straight in the eyes, he spoke with icy calm.

"Lady, at that time when I went hence, thou didst bid me, who already had thy love, to come again to claim

thy hand, promising to remain true to me in absence while I went on the quest to which thou didst send me forth. Say, Emer, is this true? "

"It is true, Cuchulain," she murmured.

"From this place I did journey to the Land of Shadows by way of Emain Macha, and from the Dūn of Skatha Ferdia departed to bring word of my deeds. Did Ferdia come home bringing good report of me, oh King? "

"Ferdia came and made good report," answered Conor Mac Nessa.

"If further proof is needed, he stands here by my side who can give it. Say, Conall, earned I the title of Champion overseas when we sailed beyond the Pillars of Hercules*? "

"Full well didst thou earn the title, thou Hound of Ulster," answered Conall of the Victories.

"Now, Emer, it seems that I have fulfilled my part of the compact. Why then dost thou sit at the marriage board pledged to Owen Mac Darucht? "

"For this reason, Cuchulain: word came that thou wast wed to Aifa."

"By whose mouth came that word? "

"It was told to me by Lewey, Prince of Munster, thy fellow pupil at Dūn Skatha, who swore he saw the rites performed."

"And didst thou hear naught of this matter from the lips of Ferdia? "

"Naught from Ferdia; but still a whisper came to me from the Court of Emania that thou wast not wed but shamed, Cuchulain."

"Ah, so Lewey told one tale, did he? and, doubtless, those at Court, whose interests it served, caused that other tale to reach thy ear, and thou, thinking me wed or shamed—in either case forsworn—thou wouldst have cast in thy lot with Owen's? "

"Nay, Cuchulain, not altogether dost thou speak truth, for know it is not of mine own free will that I sit here

* i.e., Spain.

to-day, but rather because the King and my father force Owen upon me."

"As I be neither wed, nor, in mine own eyes, shamed, it seems to me that there may well be a change of bridegrooms before all this matter is ended."

"We shall see," growled Forgall.

"Wait," said Cuchulain, and then continued: "Greeting, Lewey Prince of Munster, Lewey the Liar, Lewey whom Skatha sent back to his home because he was not deemed worthy to learn the Hero feats. Say, Lewey, why didst pour poisoned lies into the ear of the Lady Emer?"

"I told the truth as I knew it," answered Lewey, sullenly.

"Thou liest," roared Cuchulain, "thou didst lie because of certain whippings dealt to thee in the Land of Shadows, and because thy heart is evil. Liar, cheat, and coward do I name thee. Nay, pretend not to feel for thy sword, for well thou knowest thou dardest not raise it against me.

"And thou, Owen, between us are no words needed; thou hast sought to usurp my place, and between us the quarrel stands, what 'ere else betides; but of thee, my Lord of Lusca, would I ask a question:

"Why didst thou try to force thy daughter to a hateful marriage with Owen, knowing her heart set on me who have fared forth to do certain deeds for her sake? Thou didst bid me claim the maid and take her if I could. Well, lord, I am here to take her. Who of this company stands forth to deny my right?"

"I bandy no words with thee, boy," answered Forgall, "but this I say to thee, that Emer weds with Owen here and now."

"Not so, lord, for blood shall flow before that shall happen, for this I swear by Dana and the Light above me, that I go not from this hall alive until Emer goes with me as my bride."

"And that I swear, too," said Conall.

"What is thy word on this matter, King Conor," demanded Forgall.

"I give no word to one side or the other," answered

the King; "the quarrel lies between thee, Owen and Cuchulain."

"But I have a word to say," said Emer, "and it is this, let Cuchulain tell his story, and if he clear himself in this matter of Aifa, then I will wed with him and with him alone."

"That shalt thou never do, while swords are sharp," answered Forgall, Owen echoing his words.

"It is to you I speak, lady, and to my comrades of Emania," said Cuchulain, "and not to these others whom I hold forsworn. Listen, then:

"In the Land of Shadows it so happened that Aifa was made captive by Skatha, and by her taken to dwell at the dūn beyond the Bridge of the Leaps, where she lived for many months. For some reason best known to herself, Aifa desired my love; but all my love was set on thee, Emer, and so her love was naught to me. Time passed, and a time came when I was sore wounded in a foray, so that when Skatha went forth again at the head of her men, I was left alone at the dūn with the women folk. On that day word came to me that a soldier had arrived from Emania, and from him I learned that thou wast wed to an outland chief, and with him had gone overseas, but not for days after did I learn that this tale was a lie put into the man's mouth by Aifa. As I sat in the hall that evening, nursing my sorrow and brooding on my loss, Aifa crept in, and sitting down beside me seemed to share my sorrows. Presently she ordered wine to be taken to her chamber, and thither we went for the fire had died down and the hall grew cold. As we sat and talked, she poured wine into the horn, and in my sorrow I drank deep. Stillness fell upon the dwelling as the inmates went to rest, and ever as we talked Aifa crept closer, until at last she lay between my arms and our lips had almost met, for I counted all oaths broken; then an icy wind blew across our faces and I put her off from me; but she pleaded hard, and when I would not consent to mate with her, she poured the cup of friendship at parting. In that cup lurked a drug, for I knew no more until I awoke and found her at my side.

From that time I had no speech of Aifa until the day of my departure overseas, when it was necessary to speak of certain matters concerning the son who had been born of that night's madness. Say, Comrades of the House of the Red Branch, is not that the story Ferdia told on his return, and swore to on the Sacred Stone of Sacrifice as true?"

"That is the story Ferdia told," shouted the men of King Conor's guard.

"A pretty tale with which to cozen a kitchen wench," sneered Owen.

"True or false," said Forgall, "it matters not, for the wedding goes on and Cuchulain goes hence."

"There thou art wrong, lord," called Cuchulain, "for the oath is sworn, and here I stand to abide the issue, and Conall stands with me."

With an oath, Forgall springs down into the hall, and striding up to Cuchulain, thrusts his face close to the hero's.

"Wilt thou go?"

"No!"

"Then bide a dead man," says Forgall, as he rips out his sword. Hastily the feasters scramble behind the tables where they stand to watch the coming fight, but Conall steps to the foot of the high seat, waiting watchfully to ward off any other attack upon Cuchulain by Owen or Lewey.

For a space the two stand glaring at each other, alone in the centre of the hall, then in the hushed silence Forgall strikes and strikes again, two lightning blows in quick succession, but Cuchulain catches them on his shield and strikes back. There is no nicety of sword play in this, for the fight is fierce and short; but do all he will, Forgall cannot break through Cuchulain's impregnable defence. He loses patience and rushes on his foe, bellowing like an angry bull, but again he is allowed to waste his strength against a wall of steel; but at last Cuchulain tires of the play and holding his point firm instead of bringing it back on guard, he allows Forgall

to spit himself on the blade by the force of his own lunge.

A great shout goes up from the men of Emania to see the Lord of Lusca thus overthrown by a champion of the House of the Red Branch. Then another shout goes up from the men of Forgall, and of Owen, as the Prince of Fiernay leaps down from the high seat, a naked blade flashing in his hand. Conall steps forward as Owen's feet touch the ground, crying:

"To me, Owen, or I will slay thee!" But Cuchulain shouts, "This one for me, Conall; for the love of Light, leave him to me," and rushing in he deals Owen a blow which, beating down his guard, cuts deep into his shoulder and lays him low.

And now a great tumult breaks out and swords flash out with a tearing rasp as they leave their sheaths, for Lewey is calling on the men of Munster and of Fiernay to take Cuchulain, while Fial calls on her father's following to cut him down.

But Cuchulain and Conall are calling aloud, too:

"Brothers of the Boy Corps, comrades of Emain Macha, strike with us this day!"

"We come! we come!" shout the men of Emania as they leap the tables and ring the champions round. Thereon a fierce and bloody fight ensued, as King Conor and his druids slipped out through the women's door behind the high seat; for Conor did not wish that it should afterwards be said that he took the part of either side in this quarrel, for both sides were powerful, and already he had heard rumours of the hosting of Queen Maev; but Fial and Emer stood side by side, with hate in their hearts, gazing down on the sea of battling men, and ever where the fight raged thickest, the swords of Cuchulain and Conall flashed aloft.

At last it is done, and the men of Munster, Fiernay, and Lusca stream out through the door of the Lord of Lusca's dūn, hotly pursued by the men of Emania. In the doorway stand the champions watching the pursuit disappear, fighting, stabbing and cursing, over the brow of a hill. When the combatants have disappeared from

sight, Cuchulain turns and gazes up the hall to where Emer stands by the high seat alone, for Fial has gone, and with her Lewey and Owen Mac Darucht, nursing his wound and muttering threats of vengeance.

Conall moves about among the dead, the dying, and the wounded, but Cuchulain strides over the corpse-strewn floor unheeding, and stopping in front of Emer he speaks:

"Day draws to dusk, lady; all words are said, living men are sped; dost thou hold that I am cleared of shame in this matter of Aifa, and art still willing to mate with me, now that I have slain thy father?"

"Cuchulain, I hold thee free of all shame. Long since I pledged thee my word, and, though the sky fall on me and crush me, the earth gape and swallow me up, and the sea burst out and overwhelm me, yet will I mate with thee and thee alone, even though evil come of it, as I fear, for, years ago, when thou didst depart from here to the Land of Shadows, certain words passed between us at parting. We pledged our troth, and I said to thee, 'We two shall mate and love each other all our days; great love shall I give thee, but no child, for thou shalt break thy vows and take another mate before I lie in thy arms. A son shall she give thee, but him shalt thou slay in expiation of thy sin.' Part of that which I then foretold hath already come to pass; we can but await what comes in fulfilment of the prophecy, and—it were better to meet it together than alone."

After this they sat and talked a while in that place of blood, until the men of Emania returning from the pursuit, Conall came to ask what must be done.

"This shall be done," said Cuchulain: "Emer I take to wife forthwith, and for to-night we lie here, but thou shalt take the guard of Conor, and with them collect the corpses of those slain in this fight. First thou shalt lay the dead upon each other, and upon our foes shall rest the warriors of Emain Macha, and on the top of all shall rest Forgall the Wily, Lord of Lusca. About and above the dead shalt thou build a mighty mound of earth. To-morrow we journey hence to my mother Dectera at her home in Murthemney; but first we will

fire this dūn, for it is my thought that Fial, Owen, and Lewey will raise their men against us. If it be thy will, I would that thou shouldst travel the road by which Agnoman marches with our following. My men thou shalt send on to me at Murthemney."

"All shall be done as thou dost will, Cuchulain, and after I will march with my fighting tail to Emain Macha, to find how the King views this matter, whereafter I will send thee word."

As the two sat at the high table planning their future, Conall and his men came and went, clearing the hall of the dead and wounded. Soon the women of the household, who had fled at the din of combat, began to steal back by twos and threes, with white scared faces and roving eyes. At last the men's task was performed, and then Emer bade the women bring fresh food, that all might eat. After they had eaten, Cuchulain toasted them, and finally he asked Conall to fill the bride's cup, which he took from his friend's hand, and, rising, pledged Emer and she pledged him.

"Not thus should our marriage rites have been celebrated," said Cuchulain, "for now the spirits of the slain throng close about our board, and the blood of kinsmen lies, new dried, beneath our feet!"

"Yet shall our vows bind fast and hold for all time, husband!" answered Emer; and then they kissed, whereat all the fighting men cheered.

Thus was the marriage of Cuchulain and Emer celebrated in blood and fire, as had been prophesied.

Now all the guards of King Conor trooped out of the hall, leaving Cuchulain and Emer standing together in the firelight. They did not, however, march for Emain Macha that night, for already it was late, and, moreover, they feared that the foes of Cuchulain might attack and take the dūn if it were left unguarded.

Three days after these happenings at Dūn Forgall, King Conor Mac Nessa was sitting in his great hall at Emain Macha, when there entered to him Owen Mac Darucht, demanding vengeance on Cuchulain and Conall, and com-

pensation for the men of his following who had been slain in the fight by the King's own guards.

Now it happened that while they sat and talked of this matter, Deirdre, sad and tired looking, crossed the hall on her way to the women's quarters. Glancing up to see who passed, a sudden thought entered the King's mind.

"Come hither, Deirdre," he called. As she came he whispered certain words to Owen, whereat the Prince of Fiernay smiled a smile of wicked content.

"Tell me, Deirdre," said the King, when she stood before him, "is there anyone thou hatest as much or more than thou dost hate me?"

"Yes," answered Deirdre instantly, "I hate Owen more, for that which thou didst bring about from lust and wounded pride, he performed from lust for Emer and love of gain."

"Ah," said the King, laughing, "Owen is a love-lorn swain, for Cuchulain hath returned and claimed Emer, and Owen desirest thee, so thou art like a ewe between two rams; for Owen wants that which I am loth to part with; yet must the King make his subjects happy, so thou shalt go to live with Owen for a year. Thus he will not be disappointed, while I shall only lack thy sweet presence for a season." Again he laughed; but Deirdre only gazed with dry-eyed horror upon her persecutors. From the happiness of Naisi's arms she had been torn by the brutality of these two men. Conor had defiled her body and broken her spirit, and now he purposed to sully her soul, to pass her on to Owen! The agony of the thought was more than she could bear, and the added burden of this fresh indignity weighed her down, so that she stood bereft of speech. In her heart she knew that death alone would soothe her sorrows by releasing her from her sufferings.

The King called two women attendants and said:

"Go with Deirdre and prepare her for a journey, for she goes on a holiday for a year to the Prince of Fiernay. On no account leave her alone, lest she do herself a mischief, as she well might attempt for sorrow at parting from me even for so short a time"; and now both Owen

and the King laughed, for they thought this an excellent jest.

After a meal had been served, Owen departed in his chariot, taking Deirdre with him. Now it happened that by the gateway of the King's house, was a large mounting block, and as the chariot passed it, Deirdre threw herself backwards out of the vehicle, and striking her head against the stone, broke her neck. Thus did she end her troubles and was at rest; but a great quarrel ensued between Owen and the King upon the matter, the latter holding that Owen had thrown Deirdre from the chariot to spite him, while Owen held that as he had had no good of the bargain, King Conor should make him other compensation for the loss of Emer and for the men who had been slain in the fight at Dūn Forgall.

Now the story moves back to Rathcrogan and the hosting of Queen Maev, while Cuchulain and Emer are dwelling peacefully in Murthemney with Dectera.

The negotiations are all over, and each separate lord has completed his preparations for the rising-out of Erin against Ulster. From far and near, soldiers, farmers and shepherds have flocked in to Munster, Meath, and Connacht, and the great hosting of Queen Maev begins. Vast quantities of stores, battle chariots, carts for transport and munitions of war have been collected. Camping sites have been prepared, and day by day the troops march into Rathcrogan—great lords with their retinues and three or four triucha céat at their backs, lesser lords with three or four hundred javelin men and a couple of hundred swordsmen in their fighting tail; wild bands of hillmen, nominally husbandmen and shepherds, but in reality no better than highway robbers, in bands of tens, thirties and fifties; and as each company, great or small, marches in, it is escorted by one of the seven Mainés, the sons of Ailell and Maev, to the quarters allotted for its occupation.

Ket and Anluan, the sons of Ross the Red and Maga the Danaan woman, are there with three thousand swords to back them; Ferdia is there with his Firbolgs, great, jolly men, liking the kiss of a pretty wench to flavour a

mighty flagon of ale, better than aught else in the world. Lewey is there with the levies from Munster, and Loch Mac Mofebis, Fiacha Mac Firaba with a triucha céit of the Clan Rury; the men of West Meath and High Meath are there, a great company. The men of Leinster were the last to march in, not big men these, but fierce and terrible, valiant soldiers but very cruel, and living only for the sword and by the sword. Many notable champions, too, who had left Emain Macha after the slaying of the sons of Usna, had joined Maev's standard, and at their head was Cormac, King Conor's own son, who had spoken up so boldly when his father bade him slay the brethren.

On the day after that on which the hosting was complete, Maev summoned a great council of all the leaders and champions, when she finally set out her plans before them; these accepted, it only remained to fix the time when the enterprise should start.

Lewey was all in favour of moving forward to the attack without delay, and in this he was supported by Loch Mac Mofebis, a very famous warrior, and by Ket and Anluan, for, they argued, "if we attack at once we may perchance take the Ulstermen by surprise, but if we delay, we but give Conor Mac Nessa time to gather his forces."

Against this plan Fergus Mac Roy, Prince Cormac, and Ferdia Mac Daman and all the exiles from Ulster rigidly set their faces. After all the arguments of Lewey and his friends had been heard, Ferdia set forth the opinion of his fellow exiles.

"Without doubt, Loch and Lewey speak as soldiers," said he, "but even so, the hosting of 54,000 men is not a little matter, and must surely have been reported to King Conor by his spies. Moreover, in this case, there are special circumstances, which are doubtless unknown to those who counsel immediate advance, or if they be known have been treated as a myth or forgotten by those who dwell in the Southern Provinces. But we of Ulster—or who were once of Ulster until Conor brought such shame to his Court as drove us forth—know that the Curse of Macha is

no Myth, for the Ultonian debility comes each year and grips those who fight in Ulster's cause. It so happens that the curse is due to work its annual punishment in three weeks' time, and then the fighting men of Ulster will be helpless, so that thou mayst go up and occupy the land, with none to oppose ye, save the Boy Corps of Emain Macha, upon whom the curse has no effect, for they have not yet attained the years of manhood. This, then, is my counsel: that we rest here in this place of hosting for nine days, so that we may fall upon the Ulstermen on the first day of their debility, which always lasts for five days and four nights. Meantime the host here may well be exercised together, so that we go up to the fray as a concerted army, rather than as an armed rabble, or, at best, a collection of armed and trained units, acting independently of each other."

To this counsel Queen Maev gave her word, and all the other chiefs agreed, and in this way was the matter settled.

Now, to all those who sat at the Council, it appeared that Queen Maev was convinced by the arguments advanced by Ferdia. Yet, in her heart, she was far from satisfied. She felt that before committing herself to the venture she must be sure that the Fates would smile upon her undertaking. For this reason she determined to consult her Chief Druid, 'ere she became too deeply involved in the plot to draw back.

The great Council broke up amid the rattle of scabbarded swords, as the great chiefs and princes rose from their seats and departed to their quarters, each bowing his head to Queen Maev as he reached the exit. For a while the Queen sat on, absorbed in deep thought, undisturbed by the myriad sounds of camp life without. At last, as the shades of night were falling, she too rose, and dismissing the sentries and guards with a wave of her hand, walked alone to her bower, where her favourite waiting-woman had sat hour after hour ready to unrobe her mistress.

As the woman brushed and braided her corn-ripe hair, Maev sat and mused. She thought of the great power she

held, and of the glories of her state, and of her conquests in the past. All the great chiefs and princes of Erin had hailed her Queen in the Council to-day, all had made her obeisance of honour, almost of fealty, as they left her presence, but was she really so strong, was her hold on them so great that she might rely upon them to the death in the coming struggle with Ulster?

One by one she reviewed in her subtle brain the wiles and ways Fergus and she had employed to knit the jealous factions of Erin into a composite whole for the reduction of Ulster. Could the princes and chieftains be trusted not to break out against each other during the period of inaction which must ensue before the great advance could begin, she wondered; and would they remain loyal to her and to each other through the heat and stress of the day of battle? The Clan Rury under Fiacha Mac Firaba, the sons of Maga, with their retinue, and the Firbolgs of Ferdia would be true to the death she knew, true as her own men of Connacht; but what of the men of Munster under Prince Lewey? The men were loyal and stout of heart enough, doubtless, but Lewey she distrusted, and it was he the men would follow in an emergency; his orders would rule them rather than her own, and what of those wild, fierce fighters from Leinster? Almost she regretted now that she had summoned them, for such was their might that, should they be dissatisfied with the profit of the sword by which they lived, and prove traitorous-minded, they might well overawe the rest of the host at a critical moment. Perchance it would be better to split them up into companies, and distribute them as a stiffening throughout the force.

Her thoughts wandered from matters of high policy to personal things. She was young and very beautiful, this lady of many loves, as she gazed at herself in a burnished mirror, while the tireing-woman braided her hair. Would she come back safe from this great raid, or might it chance that the Choosers-of-the-Slain, flying aloft, had already marked her for their own, as they wove the names of mortals about to die into the hems of their mighty mantle? Perhaps the foray might fail of its

purpose, and she be left to languish a prisoner in Emania, or worse, she might return maimed and horrible, to drag out a loveless existence, a living death, alone!

Perchance the gods would speak to her through the lips of the druid, and make these matters clear if she made humble supplication at their altars. Yes, she would go to the druid, and through him seek the aid of the gods.

"Bring two dark cloaks with hoods, Fuamnach," she said to the waiting-woman, "and come with me, for I go to consult the Chief Druid."

Fuamnach brought the cloaks, and the two women crept silently out into the darkness of the night. Along a dim way and through a belt of trees they passed to a humble dwelling some distance from the Dūn of Rathcrogan. Maev knocked once upon the low door and got no answer. Again she tapped upon the wood with her knuckles.

"Who knocks at dead o'night?" came a sepulchral voice from within.

"Open, open!" answered the Queen.

"None enter here save one who is expected by the gods," came the voice again; "who knocks?"

"Open in the Royal Name," breathed Maev, scarcely above a whisper.

"Enter thou who bearest the Royal name," the voice answered louder than before, as the door swung silently wide on its hinges, unopened by visible hands.

A gasp of fear escaped the two women as they peered into the impenetrable gloom.

"Enter and fear not, ye who seek the gods," said the voice.

The women stepped within the room, and as they crossed the threshold the door swung to behind them as mysteriously as it had opened. Absolute silence reigned in a gloom which could almost be felt, until the striking of a spark to tinder, made them start and draw in their breath anew.

In the light of a torch which almost instantly flared up, they saw before them a short, squat man, with hollow eyes glooming in a lean, cadaverous countenance. His

form was thin and emaciated, his cheek and knuckle bones appeared to be starting through his corpse-like flesh, his grizzled hair hung matted and unkempt about his face and shoulders and over his breast; down below his middle, flowed an enormous snow white beard. A long white robe fell in straight folds from his shoulders right down to the ground, but it was open on either side from the point of the shoulder to the hip, and under the robe his waist was swathed in folds of scarlet cloth figured in gold, and on his feet were sandals.

"Wouldst thou learn the purpose of the gods, Queen?" asked the hoary druid.

"I would learn, priest."

"Art thou not afraid, oh Queen?"

"Why should the servant fear those she serves, or the daughter those who gave her life?"

"What seekest thou at the hands of the Holy Ones?"

"I seek their favour for myself and for the land."

"What if thou findest not favour but death at their hands?"

"Death cometh to all soon or late, and in death is all wisdom and knowledge."

"And if there is a price to pay, art thou prepared to pay it with beauty, love, power, or life itself?"

"I will pay the price."

"Then follow whither I shall lead, but Fuamnach, thy waiting-woman, must stay here."

So saying, the ancient priest stooped, and grasping his hands about a ring let into the floor, he heaved with all his strength, until a large stone rose up on end, revealing a flight of steps leading down into the bowels of the earth. Through the hole in the floor and down the steps the druid disappeared, calling upon Maev to follow him. Thirty steps the Queen counted as she descended, and then before her she saw a long, dark passage leading away into the impenetrable gloom.

Along this dark, narrow, earthy-smelling passage they went, their feet making no sound in the dust which had collected and settled undisturbed upon the floor through untold ages; at last they came to a blank wall of rock, at which the passage ended abruptly.

"Whither now?" asked Maev, for already the torch was burning low and she had no wish to be left in the depths of the ground without a light.

"Through living rock," answered the priest. "See!" and looking, Maev beheld a section of the rock slide to one side until an opening the size of a large door yawned before her. Through this opening the druid passed, signing to her to follow him. Immediately they found themselves in a chamber some twenty feet square, which had been hollowed in the rock by hand labour in some by-gone age. In the centre of this chamber stood the doom stone, and across it was bound what appeared to be a fair white maid. In front of the stone was placed a heavy chair, and around it, within the doom ring, knelt a semi-circle of images of peace.

With a low exclamation of surprise, Maev started back, but the priest, reaching for her hand, led her on up to the doom stone. Turning from her he lit two torches fixed in stands on either side of the chair, and then she saw that priests and human sacrifice alike were no mere images of stone, but petrified bodies of mortals who had once drawn breath, washed in water, and been warmed by suns of heaven.

"What is this place?" she asked in an awe-stricken whisper.

"It is the hall of the priests who have gone beyond," answered the druid. "No mortal hath sought audience here of the gods for a hundred years or more. Sit thou in the chair, oh Queen, while I make ready for that which must be done."

As Maev seated herself the hood fell back, leaving her yellow hair, bound about her brow by a fillet of gold, free to fall upon her shoulders. The cloak of black was fastened at the throat with a great brooch of gold, and gold bosses bordered the hem. A light dress of flaming scarlet enclosed her body, and on her arms were broad bangles of dull red gold.

For a long time the druid knelt in the circle of those petrified priests who had held his office aforetime,

muttering prayer after prayer. After awhile he ceased muttering and knelt in absolute silence. Presently he crawled forward and placed a dish of bronze, filled with white powder, at the feet of the Queen. As he knelt with arms upraised and eyes staring up into the gloom above, he muttered:

"Oh, thou who dwellest on the wings of power under the shadow of knowledge, hear and answer.

"Oh, thou in thy high place, the holy fire rises to wake thee from thy slumber."

He bent and poured water from a phial on to the powder. Instantly a dense white smoke rose and hung in a cloud some six inches above the dish. For fully a minute the cloud remained stationary, and then a long finger drifted out into the still air, and a spiral of smoke wound itself about the old man's hips. Slowly it circled round his breast and shoulders and then darted in at his open mouth, and lo, as he seemed to draw it deep down into his lungs, the smoke changed to a white, blazing flame.

Slowly the priest rose to his feet and let his arms drop, and as they dropped the spiral of flame vanished and the fire sank down in the dish.

Maev leaned forward watching intently; her left hand grasped one arm of the chair, her right elbow rested on the other, her chin supported on the back of her right hand.

"Light above! fire hath been drunk for thee! light rises to thee!" Up shot the withered old arms and the flame followed them, shining on his naked sides, and the gold ornaments on the scarlet underband, through the openings in his robe.

"Glory of the Beyond! send light into our darkness!" He dropped his arms and the flame died down, and now he threw himself upon the ground, crying:

"Thou who sittest above the lesser lights, shed thy wisdom upon us," and as he cried it seemed in that dim place as though the kneeling figures of stone bowed their heads yet lower upon their breasts.

And now as the druid lay silent, the fire in the dish died out and the torches sank and gave no light.

Mysterious flutterings and sighings echoed round the walls of the chamber in the pitch darkness, but no human sound was heard.

Maev stared straight ahead of her into the gloom, and presently she saw a faint nebulous light growing and glowing at the far end of the chamber. As it drifted towards her it assumed no mortal shape, but rather the aura of a human body.

Over the prostrate priest it hovered, and as he rose it seemed to descend and cloak him like the glow of his own life shining around his living body in the place of death.

Presently the lips of the druid moved in speech, but it was not the druid's voice that issued from them, saying:

"What seekest thou of the immortals, thou mortal who yet shall put on immortality?"

Maev trembled and sank to her knees, and with her head bowed down to the very dust, she murmured:

"All-Father, Terrible, Mighty, Mystical yet Merciful, hear thy servant."

"I hear my servant."

"Lord of Light, bless thy servant and grant knowledge of coming battle and of thy servant's fate."

"Sleep and dream; the Morrigan chooses the slain, and Fedelma from the fairy mound of Croghan weaves the loom of fate, but thou shalt come back whoever falls. It is enough?"

And now it seemed to Maev that the light faded from its outline about the druid's body, and she herself slept; and as she slept, she dreamed that she was already riding in her chariot at the head of the host towards Ulster, but ever as they marched, sweet music sounded before them until at last a wonderful maiden clad in green stood in the centre of the road and sang. As she sang she worked a fabric upon a loom with a shuttle of gold, but that which she sang, no man might understand. It seemed to Maev that she asked of the maiden her name and what was the task at which she worked.

"I am Fedelma," replied the maiden, "and I weave Erin together against Ulster."

"I go up against Ulster at the head of a mighty host," Maev seemed to hear herself say.

"Yes, but the host is scarlet as with blood, blood which shall be spilt by the Watcher of the Ford, a young, dark man, yet very terrible," said Fedelma.

Presently Maev awakened to find herself back in the chair and the torches alight on either hand, but the old druid lay still as a corpse at her feet, nor could she at first awaken him; but at last he stirred, sat up, and seeing where he was, started violently. Then he arose, and without a word made his way out of the chamber, signing to Maev to follow him.

When they reached the druid's dwelling Maev turned to him.

"Well, what is the interpretation of thy words, and my dream?"

"Nay, Queen, if the Great Ones spake through my mouth, thou alone knowest their words, but if thou wilt tell them to me and that dream thou speakest of, I will try to make the matter plain."

"After thou hadst fallen into a trance," replied Maev, "a shape of light appeared and seemed to glow about thy form asking me through thy lips what I, a mortal who should yet put on immortality, sought of the immortals. I answered, 'Knowledge of coming battle and mine own fate,' then thy lips didst make reply, 'Sleep and dream, the Morrigan chooses the slain, and Fedelma from the fairy mound of Croghan weaves the loom of Fate, but thou shalt come back whoever falls.' After this the light faded and I dreamed that Fedelma stood before my chariot, and behind me was the host. Fedelma told me that she weaved all Erin for the cattle raid into Ulster, but the host appeared to her through a mist of blood because of a certain dark man who watched the fords."

For a while the druid thought, and then he spoke.

"It seemeth to me, oh Queen, that no harm shall befall thee in this quest, but to thy great host the worst may well befall if the prophetess Fedelma hath seen it through a mist of blood. But of the Watcher of the

Fords I know nothing. It may be that he is an outland warrior upon whom the Curse of Macha may not fall, but more likely he is of the Immortals, for no one man may hold thy force at bay."

And now Maev awakened Fuamnach, who had fallen into a troubled sleep while she waited in that eerie room for the Queen, and together they returned to the dūn unobserved.

Next morning when Maev met Fergus she said to him: "Say, Fergus, what man is there in Ulster who is young and dark, known as Watcher of the Fords, and also is powerful enough to hold our host in check?"

Fergus thought for a while before he said:

"Nay, Maev, none hold that title; but of Cuchulain it was prophesied at his birth that he should keep the fords and right the people's wrongs, but Cuchulain is far away over seas or he had been with us now. None the less, did Cuchulain fight for Ulster, he would champion their cause as none other may, nor would Ferdia fight against him, and I myself should be loth to meet him in battle, for I love the lad dearly as an only son."

At this moment Ferdia joined them, and with him was Maev's daughter Findabair. Now it must be told that there was an understanding between these two, for they loved each other, but no marriage promise had been made, since the Queen did not look with favour upon a union between the Princess of Connacht and Ferdia of the Firbolgs.

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The days following the Great Council passed quickly in warlike exercises and manœuvres, and on the morning of the ninth day, the great host marched from Rathcroghan in two columns in a blinding snowstorm, the one commanded by Ailell, and the other under Maev and Fergus.

The column under Ailell was to pass North of the Slieve Gamp and Lough Allen, and the other to the South of the Mountains and the Loch, and both should concentrate at Cuilcagh on the tenth morning after setting out from Rathcroghan.

Even allowing for delays upon the way, this programme would bring them within striking distance of their objective in ample time to take full advantage of the Ultonian debility, after spies had been sent forward to see that the Curse of Macha really worked, as Fergus and his fellow-exiles from Ulster prophesied that it would do.

CHAPTER XIV

NOT long after the great fight in the hall of the Lord of Lusca and the wedding of Cuchulain with Emer, three figures came dimly up the long way to the hero's home at Murthemney, at the door of which Dectera stood scattering grain to the birds, for an early snow had fallen.

She looked up at the sound of the approaching hoofs and chariot wheels, but in this stalwart, goodly young man, who handled his pair of horses so deftly, she failed to recognise that little lad—her son—who had set out from Emain Macha so long ago, and Emer, who stood by his side, she had never seen before. Soon, however, she recognised "Black Sainglend" and "the Grey of Macha," and then Laeg as he peered forward over his master's shoulder.

For a moment she stood gazing, and then, as realisation came to her that her son had come home, and by his side stood a strange woman, she caught her hands to her mouth, with a little cry, half-gladness, half-sorrow—gladness because Cuchulain had returned at long last, and sadness for very mother-jealousy of the girl who rode in his chariot, smiling so proudly and possessively upon him.

"Greeting to thee, mother," Cuchulain shouted as he eased his horses to a standstill. "Hast thou a welcome for thy son and his wife?"

At that word "wife" Dectera started. Could this sweet-faced girl be that terrible woman-warrior Aifa of whom Ferdia had brought such strange tales from the Land of Shadows?

For a moment she doubted, and then mother-love conquering mother scruples, she said quietly: "Welcome, indeed, my son and my daughter! Welcome to Murthemney!"

Dectera came forward to the chariot, and because she

saw how sweetly the young wife stood under the frosty sun, and because she had once been a bride herself, she bent and kissed Emer, and as they kissed she knew that jealousy was dead between them for ever, and so she gave her hand to Cuchulain's wife and led her into the house.

Thus Emer came home to the house of her husband with great joy and lasting peace in her soul, bringing with her happiness and content to all within the place.

Days passed into weeks; Agnoman had arrived with all Cuchulain's fighting tail from overseas, and Cuchulain himself was fain to go to Emain Macha to see how it fared with Conall of the Victories, but his mother dissuaded him, and after she had told him all the story of the slaying of the sons of Usna and the taking of Deirdre, which had caused her to withdraw from the Court, he swore that he would go to the Court of King Conor no more.

And now quietness settled on Murthemney. War called no more to the hero, and no word came from Conall, but the call of his wife's love echoed ever in his ears, binding him to his home in many subtle ways. Day by day they drove or rode or walked the pleasant fields together, until it almost seemed the sword would be hammered out to shape a plough-share; and every day they found some fresh content in their companionship, for their love was big and strong and simple, like the great rugged hills of their native land, and their minds were simple too. And in the new-made wife was no silly coquetry, asking lover's speech and lip-service, for she knew that a brief word here and a muttered sentence there served as plain interpretation of the lasting love this strong, silent husband of hers bore for her. Not in the spoken word, but rather in the meeting of eyes and the touching of hands was their love tale told.

Moreover, Emer knew that when the faring-out came, as come it must—whether it early be or late—she would let her man go forth with never a word to stay him from the fight. Through bloodshed and strife he had won her, and through bloodshed and strife she had learned

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that man's work is the open fighting in the battle of life, while the women wait and pray at home, telling the dread tale of the unfought fight over and over to themselves as they pray. So she had grown to feel that she would rather see Cuchulain carried in on a bed of spears than giving to love—in idleness and ease—the years of toil and fighting to which he had been born. And still the call came not, but day by day Cuchulain's fighting tail grew sleek and well-seeming as they recovered from the effects of that year spent in captivity, and from the trials of the long sea voyage.

At last Conall of the Victories sent word from Emain Macha that the King had received him well, and in his heart seemed glad that Cuchulain had come home in time to claim his bride. In his message he told them of the death of Deirdre and what he knew of the shameful betrayal of Naisi and his brethren. He added that in spite of these things, he should stand by Conor Mac Nessa for the present, as there were rumours of a great hosting of the men of Erin in which unfortunately Prince Cormac, Fergus Mac Roy and Ferdia were said to be concerned.

Cuchulain sent back a message begging Conall to join him at Murthemney, and saying that he would fight for no forsworn man, the which he held Conor to be.

More days passed and still no call to arms rang through the land, although the rumours of the great hosting of Maev grew more persistent day by day.

Returning late one afternoon from a long walk over the hills with Emer, Cuchulain found his mother in close converse with a great bearded bodach. Finding them thus he hesitated on the threshold, undecided whether he should enter or return quietly to the hall. Looking up, Dectera saw him, and said:

"Enter, my son, here is thy—father, Sualtam, bearing tidings for thee."

Cuchulain entered and with him Emer his wife, giving greetings to Sualtam, who dwelt on the borders of Ulster not far from Cuilcagh.

For a while they sat and talked of Cuchulain's wanderings overseas, but presently Sualtam said:

"A great host under Ailell and Maev begins to gather at Cuilcagh, and thou alone, Cuchulain, art able to march to hold them by the fords, for the Ultonian debility falls upon all the warriors of Ulster in this their hour of greatest need. King Conor, Owen of Ferney and Conall lie writhing in pain at Emain Macha, Prince Cuscriid is prostrate in his island fortress, and the son of Uthecar Hornskin Cetcher, the great grey warrior, is so helpless he cannot raise his sword."

"How is it then that the Curse of Macha falls not on thee and me?" Cuchulain asked.

Before Sualtam could answer Dectera spoke.

"Ask not too closely of this matter," she said. "Sualtam is immune because he is not Ulster born, but thou, my son, must wait to learn why the curse falls not on thee."

"It matters not," said Cuchulain, "for I fight no more for Conor Mac Nessa the oath-breaker."

"Yet thou wilt surely fight for Ulster?" asserted Dectera.

"No. I lift no sword in the King's quarrel unless it be in defence of mine own dwelling."

And now Laeg the Charioteer spoke from the door where he had stood and listened to the conversation unobserved.

"Master, Ultonia needs thee! Soon when the debility shall pass, the King—for King he is though he be thrice forsworn—shall summon his levy. Steel-clad shoulders shall shine when the trumpets blare for battle, chariots shall sweep to and fro as the fighting men are marshalled. Soon the Red Branch Knights ride down with sword at thigh and spear in hand. Shall it be said that the Glory of Ireland, the Hound of Ulster, refrained from the rising out and left the Boy Corps to bear the brunt of battle alone?"

"Look up, Lord! Look up and raise thy head! Winter comes, the long, cold days descend; storm clouds, pregnant with trouble loom in the skies and on the horizon of our lives. What, hath Cuchulain grown woman-soft through days of inglorious ease? Doth weak lassitude

hold back strong limbs from the defence of hearth and home?

"Rise then, Cuchulain! rise! and gird thy armour on! Foes come and none stand to bar the way! Wilt thou condemn a thousand thousand innocents, who had no part in Conor's cursed work, to sword and flame?"

And still Cuchulain sat in his chair obstinate and unwilling, while around him waited anxiously his kith and kin. Still he sat on, brooding moodily, his gaze fixed on the fire, seeing, who shall say, what pictures? until the thunder of approaching hoofs brought them all to their feet.

"What now?" queried Emer as she peered out through the window into the gathering gloom.

The hoof-beats ceased and almost immediately a serving man entered the room, saying:

"A messenger from Cullan the Smith at his dūn in Quelgny craves audience of the Lord Cuchulain."

"Admit him instantly," ordered Dectera, and to them there entered a weary, staggering man. His clothes were torn and muddy, his spurs were corroded with blood, and across his forehead was a great gash where the horse had fallen and flung him against a rock; the blood had caked till the sweat had cut the cake again, his breath came in great sobbing gasps. Sualtam poured a flagon of wine and handed it to him; the fellow drank greedily, striving to speak between the gulps, but, "Take thy time, take thy time, man!" said Sualtam.

With the last drops of the draught sparkling on his beard and the flagon still in his hand, the messenger turned to Cuchulain and said:

"Thou who art called 'Hound of Cullan,' the Lord Cullan bids me say to thee, 'Once thou didst swear at parting to give me succour in the hour of danger if in my dire need I should send word bidding thee come. To-day a vast host assembles at our borders; at their head march Ailell and Maev, intent on the capture of the Brown Bull of Quelgny and on the rape of Ulster. Last night a raiding party crossed the river and carried off women, children and cattle from a lonely farm. This morning's

dawn shows the bodach crucified upon a barn-door. Mine own dūn lies on the road, the host must follow; come, then, I beg thee, come for the honour of Ultonia and the love that lay between us in the dead years.' "

A murmur ran about upon the lips of the listeners, but stilled to silence as Cuchulain lifted his hand and let it drop in a little helpless gesture.

"Feed, thou, and rest awhile," said he to the messenger, "and then, taking heart o'luck, mount a fresh beast and ride as though the underworld were at thy heels to Cullan, saying: 'Cuchulain comes and with him all his fighting tail.' Laeg, see thou to this man's wants and bid Agnoman sound the horn to summon up the fighting men."

The note of the bugle sounding without was quickly followed by the rush of scurrying feet as the men donned their armour and hurried out to the assembly. Soon old Agnoman stood within the door.

"The men are ready, Lord; what next?"

"This, Agnoman, we march to Quelgny to meet a mighty host, how great I know not. See that each man is well armed and carries with him two days' food. If thou canst obtain food from the country on the march, do so, keeping the food ye carry untouched against an emergency. Thou wilt march from here to Quelgny at the greatest speed which will allow the men to arrive there in good fighting trim." Then turning to Sualtam he said: "Say, father, wilt thou guide Agnoman on the road my men must follow?"

"Willingly will I act as guide."

"Good, then I start for Quelgny within the hour. Laeg, make ready my arms and harness the horses to the chariot."

"It shall be done, Lord, with all speed."

"Mother, wilt thou send messengers to Emain Macha to Conall of the Victories, saying, 'I go to Quelgny, and thence to the river north of Cuilcagh, where it flows from the hills. If I am driven back from there I shall retire to the second river where it shallows to the ford north of Lough Ernel' Bid Conall come as soon as may be, by

way of Monaghan and Fermanagh, so that he may fall upon the right flank of Maev's host as I hold them at the ford. King Conor may follow what counsel pleaseth him best, I care not."

Laeg and the messenger had already left the room when Dectera, Sualtam and Agnoman went out to perform their various tasks, leaving Cuchulain and Emer alone, and now these two talked for a while.

"Days of peace and joy have been ours, sweet," said Cuchulain; "days of strife and trouble draw on apace, and the sorrow of parting is almost as keen as the death in which it well may end. In the midst of a sea of blood we found our love, and in the midst of a sea of blood shall I go from thee. Often have I said that death is good, but I think now it were better never to have been born at all, for then the bitterness of sorrow at parting is unknown. Yet we are born into the world, we know not whence; we live our little day, buffeted hither and thither, doing what seem to us mighty deeds and suffering our small great sorrows; and towards the end of the story, if the Allfather deigns to grant us length of days, it is our lot to sit useless in the chimney corner o' nights babbling garrulously of mighty deeds we did in our youth, objects of scorn to those who grew from our own bodies to fill our places when the air shall close in and we pass beyond, we know not whither."

"Yet though all men pass hence at long last, Cuchulain, the warrior's name remains in song and story for the skalds to tell when the arms that wrought the deeds and earned the fame are withered in earth."

"A name, my Emer; a name! sayest thou? And hast thou thought how many must go widowed and fatherless, sorrowing through life for those who have fallen sacrificed to the making of that name? For know this, sweet my may; men climb but to power on the corpses of the slain, and the higher one climbs, the thicker foes spring up and the greater is the fall when all the tale is told. Then one day death invades us, and maybe death is a welcome guest, as we sink down into earth, murmuring 'More we would, but death ends all,' and at long last, when the

Morrigan hath claimed us, what is that name of which we have been so proud? Naught but a breeze blowing out of the West from which skalds shall fashion a word with their tongues to pass the time o' nights in the ingle by the fire-side with tales of long ago in which the name re-echoes. The tale shall please truly, and be known, but what may the listeners know of that man who bore the name, of his mind, his soul, of the motives which inspired him to the deeds, the story of which holds the listeners spell-bound?"

"Yet there is love! for though all things end in death and mighty deeds leave behind but an empty name—stripped of its soul, for as thou sayest, the soul which lightens the winter's tale, like a sudden gleam of sunlight striking on troubled seas from behind banked clouds, is not the soul of the hero of whom the tale is told, but rather the soul of the skald striking vibrant notes from the inner consciousness of his audience—still, I think love outlasts all, and lives in a place beyond, whither we go to dwell in peace, or perchance to fight again in some future life."

Thus they talked for awhile as Emer sat with her hand in Cuchulain's and her head resting upon his breast, but presently he gathered her up in his arms, and, setting her lips to his they kissed long and sweetly. When he would have put her down she clung close about his neck, for now she knew that the hour of parting was come.

And now Laeg came in, carrying with him his master's byrnie and helm and his great sword and shield; but when he went to put them on Cuchulain, Emer would not suffer him, saying that it was her right to robe her lord for battle. The sword she girded about his middle, and the helm bound upon his head, and then, taking his face between her hands, she kissed him on the lips and brow, saying as she did so, "Go now, husband, but say no more words lest tears overcome me and flow down."

So he left her with patient eyes of love and longing, gazing on the door as it closed, shutting him out from her vision. In the porch the old mother awaited him; she

too kissed him, bidding him return with honour alive, or, yet still with honour, upon the spears of his warriors.

Laeg led the splendid horses up to the door, and Cuchulain, mounting the chariot, drove away into the night. On the way he passed his own men with Sualtam and Agnomán at their head, and as he passed, cheer upon cheer travelled up the marching column as the soldiers lifted high their javelins and swords, shouting: "Luck go with thee, Cuchulain, thou glory of the land and sea." For these, be it remembered, had been with him in his faring overseas.

On his arrival at Quelgny Cuchulain found all the men folk in great agony, labouring under the Curse of Macha, so that he could get no word from them of the approach of the host under Maev. He searched round and about all the place to see if he could find the women folk or possibly one man unaffected by the debility. Presently he found a slight, red-headed fellow sleeping peacefully in a corner. Seeing him thus at rest, Cuchulain suspected him for a spy, and, fancying no nice methods with such, he caught the fellow by the collar of his smock, and with one heave set him upon his feet.

"What is thy business here, fellow?" he asked. "Quick now, no lies."

"Aye, master, I were asleep!" drawled the red-head, rubbing his eyes, but none the less regarding his captor keenly the while.

"Come, answer my question, and that right quickly," commanded Cuchulain, shaking his prisoner roughly.

"Eh? My mind be mazed in dreams like, for I thought I dreamed something about a hound of Ulster," said the fellow, looking at Cuchulain through a fringe of ragged hair which the rough handling had shaken before his eyes.

"Um," said Laeg, who was standing by, "it seems to me thou hadst best collect thy wits lest hounds' teeth worry thee and make an end of thee."

"I am Cuchulain," said the hero, who ever liked directness in all things, "if thou hast aught to say, say it!"

At this word the man dropped his pretence of rustic stupidity.

"If thou art indeed the Lord Cuchulain, one called Fergus sends greeting, bidding me say that by to-morrow's noon he passes the pillar stone of Ardcullen with certain friends of his."

Now this pillar was south of Cuilcagh, and in no favourable spot for a small force to make a stand, nor, for that matter, could Cuchulain hope for his men to arrive in time to give battle at that place. Yet with the enemy so near he must find some means of delaying them. For awhile he thought and then ordered Laeg to drive him to the woods of Ardcullen. As they drove he laughed, for he had hit upon an ingenious scheme for delaying the host, and knowing by Fergus' message that he bore him good will, he counted upon his help in this, for he had in mind a trick known to few which Fergus had taught him when he was a little lad at the Court of Emania.

At Ardcullen he went into the wood and, standing on one leg, with one eye shut and his left arm crossed behind his back, he lopped a branch of oak, and, still standing on one leg and using only one hand, he twisted the branch into a circular withe, on which he carved in Ogham writing a description of the method he had employed in fashioning it, and ended: "It is geise for the host of Queen Maev to pass this spot until a follower of hers other than Fergus Mac Roy hath accomplished the feat I have to-day performed." He then hung the withe around the pillar stone of Ardcullen, where it was bound to attract the eyes of Maev's advanced scouts next day. This done, he scouted forward with Laeg, until, from the top of a high hill, he could see in the distance the glow of the camp fires of the enemy. So great was their number that it seemed the plain was on fire as far as the eye could reach.

Now when Cuchulain realised from the glimmering fire points far below him the vastness of the host which was coming against Ulster, he turned swiftly about and drove back at speed to meet the slender three hundred he had gathered on his travels from every corner of the earth.

After a long drive he met them, still marching on through the night. Bidding them halt and rest, he took Agnoman on one side and told him his plans and bade him take the men with all speed to the banks of the River Derg, five miles North of Lough Erne, and opposite the valley which narrowed right down to where it touched the banks of the lake.

When the men resumed their march, Sualtam would have gone with them, but Cuchulain restrained him, bidding him mount up into the chariot instead. As they drove along, he explained that they were going to find a swift horse in order that Sualtam might ride to Emain Macha to tell King Conor that between 50,000 and 60,000 men of Erin marched against him, and that Cuchulain and his men would hold them back as long as might be in the narrow pass between the hill of Erne and the foothills at the south-eastern end of the Donegal Mountains, but that Cuchulain might not deny the pass to them for long, so that the Ultonians must rise out swiftly if they would save their land.

In time they came to a farm where a good horse was found, and after seeing Sualtam started on his journey, Cuchulain drove back to a concealed spot near Cuilcagh, where he might lay in wait for the scouts of Maev.

The hiding place he chose was a little copse of fir trees on a rising knoll of land, from which a wide view of the surrounding country could be obtained. Behind him the rugged ground rolled upwards to 800 feet or more; on either side the hills sloped away, on the left almost to the banks of the Upper Erne, and on the right to Lough Melvin, ten miles away; below him the waters of a little lough sparkled and laughed in the reflected rays of the early morning sun, and straight ahead over the gently rising plain ran the road, bleak and deserted, until it narrowed to a bare streak and finally disappeared between the hills which lay around Lough Allen, twelve or fifteen miles away, at which spot, although he knew it not, the host of Ailell was even then resting and awaiting news of the column under Maev and Fergus, which was marching north of the Slieve Gamp and the lough.

Presently out of the nothingness of the road, points of light appeared glittering and sparkling intermittently in the shimmer of the winter sun. Seen one minute and lost the next, Cuchulain watched the flashes until they resolved themselves into one dark speck moving rapidly forward along the whiteness of the road. The speck grew to a black blotch, and the blotch to a pair of horses drawing a fast-driven chariot bearing an armed warrior and his driver. Half an hour passed and they were so close that every point of equipment could be seen and appreciated. At last they reached the river bank, and entered the water, picking their way slowly and carefully across the ford. With a shout the driver urged his team up the steep North bank strewn with stones, on one of which the near-side horse set his foot and came crashing to ground, dragging his companion with him.

For a moment they heaved and kicked with the chariot half in and half out of the water, and then regained their feet and stood trembling. The warrior and his charioteer jumped out into the shallow water and walked ashore; for a moment they stood in deep consultation, the warrior pointing first to the chariot and then to the wood, in which Cuchulain lay hidden, while the driver nodded his head in comprehending answer. Presently the fighting man made off along the river bank to the left, and the charioteer bent over the traces before leading his frightened animals up on to the grassland bordering the shelving ledge of rock. Then Cuchulain saw the cause of the delay, for the chariot pole was broken.

Tethering the horses to a tree hard by, the man walked across to the wood, which he entered and, drawing his short sword, set to work to fell a short but stout fir sapling, whistling the while. The noise of the falling blows, combined with the music he made, served to hide the sound of Cuchulain's approach; presently, however, the charioteer stood up to wipe the sweat out of his eyes with the back of his hand, and was surprised to see a dark, stern-looking man observing his labours.

"Who art thou, and what dost thou here?" asks Cuchulain,

"I am the charioteer of the Prince Arlam, son of King Ailell," says the man, "but we have broken our chariot pole by this accursed ford, so that I must fashion a new one, while my master chases a famous stag that is said to range free in these parts."

"Ah," says Cuchulain, "it would lighten matters were I to help thee," and so saying he picks up the sapling the man has felled, and with no visible effort, trims off the young branches in an amazingly short space of time.

"It seems to me thou wert better employed as a man-at-arms than in the fashioning of chariot poles," observes the man.

To this Cuchulain makes no reply, but presently he says: "I would learn more of this stag thy master follows, for I too have been a hunter in my time."

"Well, thou seest," replies the driver, "it is a stag that sometimes assumes the shape of a dog, as I hear, and then it is called the Hound of Ulster."

"Um," says Cuchulain, "and what will thy master do if he finds this strange beast?"

"Of a surety he will strike off its head," says the man.

"Ah, then," laughs Cuchulain, "it is time I was jogging, for I am that very hound that Arlam is seeking."

With a cry the charioteer springs to his feet and makes off along the river bank after his master as fast as his feet can carry him, but Cuchulain whistles up Laeg, who is waiting near with his chariot, and together they thunder away after the man. Him they pass and never heed, but soon they spy Arlam, and as he turns to see who passes, Cuchulain leans from the chariot, and with one blow of his sword he sweeps the Prince's head from his shoulders; the head is picked up and, driving back, Cuchulain pitches it to the terrified charioteer, bidding him fit the new pole to the chariot in peace, and then drive back to Ailell bearing the Prince's head as a present from the Watcher of the Fords.

Careful questioning elicited from the man the routes by which the spoilers were marching, as well as the fact that the host had been split into two columns, which should meet at Cuilcagh that very day. Having also

gathered from this man that Ailell waited on the banks of Lough Allen for news of the column under Maev and Fergus, which should by now be well to the north-east of the Curlew Mountains, Cuchulain decided to drive in that direction.

To the west of Lough Allen the hills open through a narrow pass on to the plain beyond, and here it was that Cuchulain arrived just in time to meet two of Maev's chariots driving abreast and about to enter the defile. When they saw him, the charioteers reined in their horses, uncertain what to do, but Cuchulain did not hesitate.

"Straight at them, Laeg!" he ordered, and in an instant the great war car was thundering down upon the astounded foe. Instinctively they opened out to let him through, but too late; already he was upon them and his whirling wheels tore a wheel from a chariot on either hand as he burst clear. The shock had been terrific, so great that the warriors on either side clung to the woodwork of their vehicles, not daring to leave go to use either sword or battle axe, and so tremendous was the pace at which Laeg had urged the horses along, that a hundred yards were covered after the impact before he could bring them to a standstill.

"What now, Lord?" he queried.

"Round and back," Cuchulain ordered; "I would have speech of these men."

"Soldiers of Erin," he said, when he came up to the spot where they stood gloomily surveying their wrecked chariots, "ye have come up a mighty host against Ultonia, thinking to find the land defenceless, but instead ye have found a champion who may serve Ultonia's needs until the Ultonian debility is passed. This tale shalt thou bear to Queen Maev if any go from this place alive, for it seems that some blows should be struck ere we part." So saying, he stepped from his chariot and stood on guard waiting for the two warriors to attack him, nor were they loth, thinking they had but a youth to deal with. The fight raged back and forth and ever Cuchulain had the better of it. Now it so happened that one of the charioteers of Erin loved his master dearly, and seeing

him like to be worsted by the Ulsterman, he drew his long knife and crept forward to plunge it into Cuchulain's back, but Laeg too loved his lord, and seeing the fellow's intention, he snatched a javelin from the chariot and, hurling it with all his might, pinned the assassin to the earth, and then with his blood thoroughly up, he drew his sword and fell upon the other, whom he slew quickly.

Meanwhile Cuchulain had cut down one of his opponents and so seriously wounded the other that he soon gasped out his last breath as the blood spurted from a severed vessel.

Then followed some grim work, utterly repugnant to the hero, but needs must when the one fights the many. Soon the heads were lopped from the corpses and bound to the chariot wheels.

"Where now, Lord?" asked Laeg.

"Straight on out into the open plain!"

Once in the open they saw the whole of the half host of Maev resting in a great line of companies as they ate their morning meal.

Laeg looked up at his master with questioning, awe-struck eyes, but for all answer, Cuchulain took the reins firmly into his own hands, and turning the team to the right, drove steadily towards the foe; within two hundred yards of them he turned left-handed and sent "Black Sainglend" and "the Grey of Macha" thundering along the front of the line, the bloody heads with flying hair making a horrid fringe to the revolving wheels. Near the end of the line, he made a great sweep to the left and clattered away out of sight up the pass.

"Who in the name of the gods was that charioteer whose wheels seemed to shed blood around?" asked Maev of Fergus as she rushed from her booth to find out why the whole host had so suddenly burst into an uproar.

"Methinks," answered Fergus, "that must be my little pupil Setanta, who is better known as Cuchulain, now grown into a very great champion. This, Queen, is that Watcher of the Fords of whom Fedelma prophesied to thee."

"If there be but a thousand like him in Ulster, we may find many hard blows and little profit ere we work our will on the land."

"In that thou speakest sooth," answered Fergus, "for he is more than man, as thou sayest, and the curse of Macha falls not on him."

While this conversation was going on Cuchulain was driving hard to the ford in the second river north of Lough Erne. Arrived there, he bade Laeg take the heads from the wheels while he cut a four-pronged pole. This he bedded deep in the stream as he stood in his chariot, and on each prong he impaled a gory, battered head, and below them set an Ogham writing, that he had bedded the pole with one hand, standing in his chariot, and it would be geise for any to pass the ford before the pole had been plucked out single-handed by a warrior in a chariot. Next Laeg fetched great rocks, which were piled about the foot of the pole to render the feat more difficult.

To this day that place is known as Athgowla—the Ford of the Forked Pole.

By this time Cuchulain and Laeg were utterly tired out with their labours. It was therefore with grateful hearts that they saw the blazing fires old Agnoman had caused to be lighted at the bivouac by the Derg.

All through that night the gentle-fingered snowflakes drifted down, lighting on the earth without sound. Thicker and thicker grew the storm until a man who wandered a hundred paces from the fires might well find his death, but not the way back to his comrades. But little the dauntless three hundred recked of the storm, for they lay warm and snug in the circle of shelter the war-wise old warrior had caused them to build, with great fires within and without the ring at every half-score paces.

But it fared not so well with the great host of Ailell and Maev which had gathered at the Pillar Stone of Ardcullen and thereon found the twisted withe bearing the Ogham writing, which was brought to Fergus to decipher. As he read it, he laughed, for, as has already been told, he had himself taught Cuchulain the trick.

"It is indeed geise for us to pass the Pillar Stone until some one hath emulated Cuchulain's feat," quoth he. So man after man attempted it, but none succeeded, for they had not the trick of it, nor would Fergus tell them how it might be done.

Angered by the laughter of Fergus, Maev sent for her chief druid to see what he might make of the writing.

"Fergus is right," asserted the wise man, "yet not altogether right, for the writing is so framed that the geise holds for one night only."

Hearing this, they refrained from attempting the feat, and spent a miserable night in the snow, for there could not be found wood enough to build either fires or shelters for all that great company.

At break of day the snow ceased to fall, but so deep did the white carpet lay upon the earth that they were hard put to it to cover ten miles that day. It was not until mid-morning on the day following that they came to Athgowla and found the forked pole and its grisly burden confronting them.

"Oh, this little Cuchulain," laughed Fergus when the writing was read, "he will be the death of me! Let him but devise sufficient gazsha and we shall grow old ere ever we see Emain Macha."

All day long the great champions of Erin strove to pluck forth the stake, but without success, until the twilight began to fall. All the while Fergus jeered at them, but at last Prince Lewey lost his temper, and, turning to Fergus, he sneered:

"Art very ready with thy words, Mac Roy, but perchance thou knowest the task this youngling hath set us is beyond thy might also, wherefore thou talkest loudly to cover thine own fear to essay the deed."

"What! art mad, Lewey?" roared Fergus. "Ho, there, my chariot!"

Still laughing, he drives into the water and lays hold of the pole. The footboards of the chariot groan and creak under the effort he is making, but strive as he will the pole does not move. At last the boards give way

and Fergus is precipitated into the water and emerges dripping, amidst the yells and jeers of the men of Connacht.

"A stouter chariot," he yells. "It shall never be said that Fergus failed to undo that which Cuchulain did."

Fergus strives and tugs; his battle frenzy comes upon him, and the muscles of his neck and the veins of his forehead stand out like knotted whip lashes, but still the pole stirs not. For a moment he pauses to rest, then he draws a great gasping breath and goes to it again; his eyes appear to start from their sockets and his teeth grind together as the steam rises up from his body in the frosty air and the sweat rolls down, but this time he is not to be gainsaid, and at last the pole flies from the bed of the river with a hollow sucking "Plop."

Maev has stood to watch this feat with a tame squirrel on one shoulder and a pet robin on the other, and now while all men stand and silently marvel at the greatness of the deed, a sling-stone whistles through the air and the squirrel drops dead. Maev turns hastily to seek cover, but before she has moved six paces, a second missile flies and the robin too is killed. There is a gasp of wonder, and then for a moment they see Cuchulain standing on the farther shore as he waves his hand and shouts to Fergus: "Well done, old warrior; but tell Queen Maev not to come too close to my little stone messengers."

With shouts of fury the soldiers rush down to the ford—and that was the death of some, for so great was the press that many were pushed into the deep water, where they were drowned—but the way is blocked by Fergus' chariot, and all they hear of Cuchulain is his laughter dying away in the woods.

The day was now so far gone that it was useless to attempt the passage of the ford, so the host encamped on the Southern bank of the river for that night. But there was little peace or sleep for those who had pitched their bivouac nearest to the water's edge, for slung stones and even an occasional light javelin whistled through the air killing or wounding whomsoever they touched.

Next morning, when the host was ready to move forward on the march, Cuchulain appeared on the far bank, preceded by his charioteer bearing a bough as a sign that they came in peace.

"What wantest thou here?" demanded the commander of the guard set over the ford.

"I crave speech of Queen Maev," answered Cuchulain.

Presently Queen Maev came down to the ford, accompanied by Fergus Mac Roy.

"Queen," said Cuchulain, "I have seen all the might of thy host and full well I know that sooner or later thou must overwhelm me and push forward into this land, and yet there is but one pass by which thou canst come, and that I hold with all my fighting tail, strong and very valiant fighters from overseas untouched by the Curse of Macha, so that it well may be that many shall fall before the pass is freed. Moreover, for the honour of arms, I would engage in single combat the most valiant of thy chieftains here at the ford ere they set foot in Ulster, if that be thy will. If thou wilt grant this my plea, why then, a boon for a boon, Queen Maev. As things are, thou shalt find the passage of the ford hard for man or beast, for I have had time to lay traps below the water; but if thou wilt send thy champions against me singly, then on the third day I will give back, even though I be not defeated before then."

"Nay, Cuchulain," answered the Queen, "were it not better that thou shouldst join my host? Bethink thee! all thy friends march under my banner; thy King is forsworn and an oath breaker who hath driven thine own mother from his court by the very horror of his deeds. Moreover, an' thou wilt join me, no scath shall fall upon Murthemney, and thou and thine shalt have all that heart may desire or eye covet in Connacht or the conquered province of Ulster, and after Fergus, the champion's guerdon shall be thine. Bethink thee well, Cuchulain; Fergus thy instructor aforetime stands here beside me; Cormac, thy King's own son, is in my camp, and with him thy shield brother Ferdia."

"Lady! this may not be," Cuchulain answered proudly, "for I am Ulster born and bred, and Ulster is to me as her maidenhood to a young girl; my loyalty is mine honour. Full well I know that Fergus, Cormac and F'erdia fight in thy quarrel, and grieved I am to stand against those who are dear to me as mine own flesh and blood; yet Lewey the liar, Lewey the cheat, the poisoner of maids' minds, serves also in thy train, and for him I have not words but blows."

"How say you, Fergus," asked Maev in a low voice; "were it well to do as he asks?"

"I think well indeed, Maev, since one of us may overcome him in the day, and then it were an easy matter to drive his following, lacking their leader, from the pass."

"Well, better to lose a dozen champions if need be, in the hope of a clear road, than to throw a thousand swordsmen away in the attempt to force the passage of the hills," and then she cried across the water to Cuchulain: "Thy plea is granted; we go to choose those who come against thee."

Throughout that day Cuchulain fought six very valiant warriors one after the other, and each of them he slew or wounded so seriously that they were all unmeet for fight.

Now two things happened at the end of that day's work, as it was foreordained should come to pass. The first was that as he drove wearily back in his chariot with Laeg, Cuchulain observed another chariot coming towards him driven by a solitary woman clad in a multi-coloured garment. Now he would have passed her by, but she drew her chariot across the road to bar his passage.

"What wouldst thou with me, maiden?" said Cuchulain wearily.

"Cuchulain," answered the beautiful girl, "of all men in the world thou art fairest and bravest. Thy valour is sung and told in the North and the South, the East and the West; thy race is high and thy blood royal. It is but meet, therefore, that the love of a king's daughter should be thy guerdon, and such a love do I offer to thee."

"Nay, maiden!" answered the hero. "Love is good and fight is good, but each in its own time and place. As thou dost find me I am all spent with war and fighting; mine arms are red to the shoulder with blood, and in my heart is no thought of woman."

"Then shall thy fate overtake thee, thou fool!" said the woman bitterly, and even as Cuchulain looked, she vanished from his sight with her chariot and horses, nor did even so much as a wheel mark remain upon the road; only a hoody crow cried harshly from a tree.

"Now woe worth me," he said, "for we have seen the Morrigan, the chooser of the slain, and, Laeg! I think that death draws nigh."

The second happening took place in Maev's camp, for she summoned to her Fergus, Ferdia and Loch Mac Mofebis.

"I fear this strange youth greatly," she said to the champions, "and it is my thought to send ye, my three greatest warriors, up against him on the morrow."

But "Not yet," said Fergus, and "Not yet," said Ferdia. Loch, however, was of a different mind, and promised to go up against Cuchulain the next morning. Fergus could in no wise be persuaded to change his resolution, so Maev let him depart with Loch, who went to make ready his weapons against the morrow's combat. She kept Ferdia with her talking easily of this matter and the other. Presently she said: "Tell me, Ferdia, what is it thou dost most desire in all the world?"

"Queen," answered the youth boldly, "above all things I desire first the hand of thy daughter the Princess Findabair."

"And what wouldst thou do to win the Princess?"

"Aught in the world that thou couldst name, Queen."

"Wilt thou swear that by the oath which may not be broken?"

"I swear it!"

"Then thou shalt go up to-morrow against Cuchulain if Loch fails, and in reward the Princess shalt be thine."

But Ferdia was sad at this saying, for now he saw, too late, how a clever woman had entrapped him to fight his

own shield brother. Yet it must be so, for the unbreakable oath had been sworn and there was no going back.

At peep of day, Loch went down to the ford and there he found Cuchulain awaiting him. The combat which immediately ensued was frightful; the waters boiled around their feet as they strove, and anon they were stained red with blood. Cuchulain could make no play against this new foe, for unseen powers seemed to battle against him, and twice he was wounded and as yet Loch had taken no hurt. At last, as the hour of noon drew nigh, Cuchulain bethought him of that terrible weapon he had never yet made use of—the Gae Bolg which Skatha had given to him. Presently he made a secret sign to Laeg, who threw the weapon down to him. Springing back, Cuchulain fastened it to his foot, and with all his strength drove the terrible belly spear into his opponent.

“I have got my death of that,” cried Loch in a great voice, “but I pray thee carry me to the Northern shore, that in death I may fall further forward on the quest than any man of the host hath done as yet.”

“The boon is thine,” said Cuchulain as he tenderly lifted up the dying man and bore him up the Ulster bank of the river.

Now the time had come for Ferdia to retrieve the oath he had sworn overnight, so they went to the place by the ford where he had been sleeping since early morning on the cushions taken from his war chariot, and told him of the death of Loch Mac Mofebis while his charioteer bound the war harness on him.

When Cuchulain saw who came down the path to the ford to do battle with him, he cried out in a great voice of anguish:

“Ah, say not Ferdia, my old shield mate, who stood shoulder to shoulder with me in the Place of the Glen, that *thou* hast come out to war against me this day! What, are there no other champions in Erin that thou, who art dear as mine own heart’s blood, must needs come out to take my head? Before Dana, they will send Fergus, who is as my father, into the fray next. Never did I think, Ferdia, when we slept and fought side by

side in field and sunshine in Skatha's land, that we should ever stand against each other thus."

"Of a truth, Cuchulain, I know we have shared one bed and board like brothers born at one birth, and rather would I lie dead at thy feet than strike at thy head this day. Yet the unbreakable oath is sworn, and so things must fall out as is foreordained. Say no more, my dear comrade, or thou wilt unman me; rather let us embrace and then work out that which lies before us. And—choose thou the weapons we shall use."

"Nay, Ferdia, thine shall be the choice of weapons."

"As thou wilt, Cuchulain, and I name the light casting javelins." Now Ferdia named the javelin for very love of his old comrade. "For," reasoned Ferdia within his mind, "Cuchulain's sword arm hath had heavy work of late; he casteth the javelin equally well with either hand; moreover he hath been up to his thighs in water many hours, and the javelins we may cast from bank to bank."

No such spear work had ever been seen in Ireland before. Back and forth buzzed the missiles from bank to bank and ne'er a one penetrated the defence of the other. About half way through the afternoon, Ferdia took up a great heavy casting spear by mistake, and hurling this, instantly wounded Cuchulain, who replied by hurling the weapon back. Now naught but great heavy javelins were used, and the blood flowed freely from both the combatants.

At last a halt was called and each champion went off to his own camp after first embracing and promising to continue the combat on the morrow. That night, they sent messengers to each other with healing balms and choice dishes; further, Ferdia sent a messenger to say that as he had named the weapons on that day, it was only fitting that Cuchulain should choose the ones they would use on the morrow. Cuchulain replied that since they had only fought for a few hours on that day, they would fight on the morrow with broad bladed stabbing spears from the chariots on his bank of the river until noon, and thereafter they would fight either in the water or on land as and with

whatever weapons Ferdia might choose. So Ferdia named the two-handed cutting swords for the afternoon, the fight to take place on Cuchulain's bank. This Ferdia did because he knew that on the Northern bank of the river none would interfere with the champions as they fought, but he feared that should Cuchulain venture within reach of the wild levies of Maev, they might fall suddenly upon him and do him to death.

At daylight Ferdia came to the ford, but he could in no wise cross by reason of the entanglements Cuchulain had caused to be placed in the bed of the river, so he went over on foot with his charioteer. After they had embraced, Cuchulain gave him a chariot in which to fight, and then the combat began. Back and forth tore the war-cars until the blood and sweat dropped down from the limbs of the weary horses and the floors of the chariots were slippery with the gore which poured from the wounds of the warriors and their charioteers. At last the horses could hardly encompass a trot, let alone a charging gallop, and so a truce was called and the champions sat side by side and ate their none-meat; after which they bathed their limbs in the water and bound up each other's wounds before they stood up again to fight with the great two-handed swords which Ferdia had named.

Now they begin to circle round each other with swords raised. Ferdia springs forward and strikes a fearful blow, Cuchulain leaps back and as he does so strikes down, but Ferdia catches the blow on his hilt, although the force of his own blow had well nigh overbalanced him. Now he strikes again, and this time the blade shears the flesh from Cuchulain's forearm and rouses the lurking devil in him. With both hands the warriors ply their blades to the sound as of smiths striking on anvils.

Still the fight goes on, and fresh wounds are added to those the heroes already bear. On the far bank, the men of Erin groan or cheer as their champion gains or loses the advantage, while Laeg hops around the combatants, now on one leg, now on the other, in ecstatic fear and admiration.

Presently Cuchulain catches Ferdia's blade in the notch in his own hilt, and with a quick wrench snaps it in two. Ferdia casts the useless hilt from him and, drawing a heavy dagger, strives to close within the sweep of the blade, but Cuchulain smites and smites hard, and the cruel steel sinks deep into Ferdia's shoulder, laying him bleeding and unconscious on the turf.

With a great cry Cuchulain flings his sword from him as a groan goes up from the host, and, gathering his fallen friend up in his arms, he bears him across the river and lays him at the feet of Fergus, whom he beseeches to care for him tenderly.

Thus ended the third day's fighting by the ford, and the time had come for Cuchulain to give back to the pass as he had promised; but there was still another champion, the famous Natchranthal, who would try a deed with him, and to this combat Maev had agreed on condition that Fergus should himself go against Cuchulain if Natchranthal failed.

Although Fergus knew nothing of it, this suited the Queen's purpose well, for while she was yet in the Ox Mountains, her spies had told her that the Brown Bull had been moved from Quelgny to Slieve Gallion. Thither she had sent a third of her army under Buic Mac Banblai to effect its capture, giving out that the men went on a foray to collect provender. Buic and his raiders had now been away many days; news might come at any moment, and it was not her wish to join issue in the battle of the pass until some tidings were to hand, for the return of some 18,000 men would aid in the forcing of the passage. Also, she had other troops of raiders sent out secretly to ravage Bregia and Murthemney.

That night Fergus went across the river, saying that he would acquaint Cuchulain with Maev's wish and find out with what weapons the fight should be fought on the morrow. His real purpose in going was to make a pact with his old pupil lest these two should be forced to face each other.

Laeg, who was watching while his master slept, willingly guided Fergus across the ford when he heard his

errand, and to a glen where the hero rested in a little cave sheltered from the biting wintry winds.

Within the cave Cuchulain was sleeping peacefully in the firelight. Very pale and worn he looked, as Fergus watched him with loving, fatherly eyes, for he had lost much blood that day. His breathing was deep and quiet, but he started fiercely up with sword in hand directly Fergus laid a hand upon his shoulder.

"What now?" he asked, and then as he recognised his visitor, "Is it thou indeed, my dear master?"

"Yea, Cuchulain, I am come to have speech with thee."

"Then sit thou over against me by the fire, and Laeg shall pour for thee a cup of such wine as is ours."

"It cometh upon me, Fergus," said Cuchulain presently, "that I shall fall in this pass to which I return at break o'day, for mine eyes have seen the Morrigan and already the underworld seems ever about my feet, battling against me."

"Of these matters naught is known to me, who am but a plain soldier," answered Fergus, "but thou mayst well bide here by the ford for yet two other days if thou art still meet for fight."

"How may this be, for my word is pledged to leave the ford after the third day, win or lose!"

"In this wise: Natchranthal hath petitioned Maev that he may try to overthrow thee, and to this she hath consented on condition that should he fail, I am to put on my harness and do my best to make an end."

"With Natchranthal will I fight gladly," answered Cuchulain, "but against thee, friend and guide of my childhood, will I lift no hand. Nay, say no more, Fergus, this may not be! What! is it not bad enough that mine own shield-brother, Ferdia, lies wounded—it may be to death—at my hands, without we two standing against each other to slay or be slain? I tell thee, Fergus, I will have none of this rede of thine."

"Softly, softly, dear lad," soothed Fergus, "thou hast not yet heard all my rede."

"What, then, is thy council?"

"Well, it seems to me that thou mayst well overcome Natchranthal, although he is a very mighty man, else were I not here; that being so, I must come against thee willy nilly. On the other hand, shouldst thou refuse to fight with him, being loth to fight with me, the battle of the pass is fought two days the sooner, and thy chances of saving thy handful of men rendered thereby less, for then succour is two days further away."

"Now it seems that we are indeed in a cleft stick," Cuchulain interrupted him.

"Not altogether so," continued Fergus, "for there are more ways to come to the other side of a bush than through the prickles; but listen carefully, for this is my plan. Maev hath given a day to Natchranthal in which to overthrow thee. Thou shalt accept his challenge, and, if thou canst, win the combat as quickly as may be, so that time may be gained to dress thy wounds and rest thy weary limbs. On the second day from this at mid-morn I will come forth to the ford saying that weapons have not been chosen; then shalt thou put me under geise to come against thee only with the thrusting spear formed from a new cut sapling; by the time these spears are shaped, the afternoon sun shall be well down the heavens, and when at last all is ready, thou shalt fly as swiftly as horses can gallop from me to the pass. Thus may time, which is more valuable to thee than precious stones, be gained and thy strength grow in thee once more against the glorious fighting I foresee when we come to force the passage of the hills."

"Nay! I fly before the face of no man living," answered Cuchulain.

"Be not foolish and overproud, lad," said the older man; "it is but a ruse, and I would gladly fly from thee, but no good would come of it, for it would but bring thee into the midst of our host, where ill would certainly befall thee. If thou hast still any scruples," he went on, seeing Cuchulain hesitate, "then this I swear, that when we meet again, I will willingly run away, to make all equal between us."

"Let it stand so, then," answered Cuchulain; "and now, what of this fight to-morrow? If the choice of weapons lies with me, let it be all and any!"

"All and any it shall be, and so I will tell Natch-ranthal."

For a while they sat in silence, each thinking his own thoughts, and gazing into the heart of the fire.

Presently Fergus broke the silence.

"Dost thou wonder, Cuchulain, why it is that I, who fight under the banner of Ailell and Maev, give thee counsel and comfort, and why it is that Ferdia and I fight for her rather than at thy side?"

"Of the slaying of the sons of Usna and the rape of Deirdre, which drove thee, with many another, from the Court of Conor, I know, and I also hold the King to be forsworn and an oath breaker. Once, too, I also said that no more should my steel flash out in Conor's quarrel; yet at the last, Fergus, Ulster is all in all. Bethink thee, Fergus, the land is all, the mortal King nothing, for he doth but hold it as a trust for those Old Ones who sit on high and watch for ever. Why, man, his very actions shew him but a man as other men, feeling heat and hunger, lust and fear. Do not the same words serve him that we frame about our tongues? Is not the same iron found within the earth to form his sword and mine? Is not his being cased in the selfsame crust of flesh and bone? Shall he not lay in the selfsame earth which shall enclose our forms? Kings come and go to monarchise their little hour, the adder's sting or selfsame poisoned cup may bring about their fall, but at the last, whether they live well or ill, all, all come to the selfsame dust from which they spring. Naught matters for the man, old friend; but for the land, the constant living land which shall endure, another course is set. Year in, year out she sleeps and breathes gently with the changing seasons, giving her warriors birth, and for a man to turn against his land for the evil done by a king, is like a child who strikes his mother to avenge his father's sin. Ulster was a Kingdom, Fergus, when we yet slept in the womb of time, and Ulster will be a Kingdom, standing

alone for the right, long, long after we have passed hence."

"In truth thou hast learned wisdom overseas, Cuchulain, and hadst thou been here when all these things came to pass, Ferdia and I had stood shoulder to shoulder with thee to-day, for know that we see eye to eye with thee in this, and therefore I work as best I may to keep thee from scath. Well, the hour grows late and thou shalt need thy strength at dawn, so sleep and rise refreshed, thou Glory of the North."

Day broke in a welter of sleet and found Cuchulain by the ford, nor had he long to wait, for Natchranthal was right eager to try if he might succeed where the greatest champions in all Erin had failed. But Cuchulain knew that the fate of Ulster rested on his shoulders; moreover, he was spent with wounds and fighting, so that he was not willing to run the risks of a protracted combat with so doughty a warrior as Natchranthal, wherefore he drove the Belly Spear against him below his shield directly they engaged, and that was straightway his death.

On the day following, things fell out as had been planned, and the shadows were long on the ground when Cuchulain flew from before the face of Fergus, so that it was too late for the host to march against the pass that night.

As the chariot rattled along it came abreast of an old woman, sitting by the wayside wringing her hands and weeping.

Bidding Laeg pull up, Cuchulain descended from the chariot and said:

"What ails thee, mother, that thou dost sit by the roadside making lamentation?"

"Alas, fair sir!" she replied, "a great host cometh through the pass of St. Beagh, driving myriad herds of cattle before them."

At these tidings Cuchulain sprang into the chariot again and bade Laeg drive hard to see what this new incursion might be, "for," said he, "it can hardly be the men

of Ultonia, or the old dame had not fled, and yet I had thought the whole of the men of Erin had risen out to the hosting of Maev, and were gathered at the ford we have just left."

Nigh on twenty long miles they drove before the lowing of cattle and the sparkle of fires told them that they approached the mysterious force. Naught could be accomplished in the dark, so Cuchulain lay down to rest upon the western bank of the River Mourne.

At daylight a great stir was heard, and looking out from behind the bushes where they had sheltered, Cuchulain and Laeg saw that the men of Erin, indeed, lay before them, and even as they looked, the cattle they had carried off were got on the move while a party of half a dozen leaders went on half a mile in advance of the host. With them rode Buic Mac Banblai, who, as we have seen, commanded the raiders.

Quietly and quickly the horses are harnessed and hooked in. Away they go thundering over the ground, and a wild yell goes up from the host as they see their foe. Then the advance party views the chariot, and clapping in their spurs, they sit down to ride hard in pursuit; stride by stride they draw on until they are well within javelin cast, and then two men fall to Cuchulain's well-flung spears.

"When I stamp my foot, turn and charge them," he says to Laeg, who nods his head in answer.

On they race, and still the javelins whistle and hum in the air; now Cuchulain stamps his foot, and the chariot sweeps round and thunders back on the four pursuers. Two draw clear, one goes down under the clattering hoofs, and as they pass Cuchulain thrusts Buic through with his broad-bladed stabbing spear. Round goes the chariot again, and they are off with flying hoofs to the ford of the Derg, passing clear to the north of the lesser Derg Hill on the opposite side of the Mountains of Donegal, lest they should fall in with the advancing hosts of Ailell and Maev.

Now, although Cuchulain did not know it at the time, the Brown Bull of Quelgny was in the midst of that

great herd of cattle which the raiders, under Buic Mac Banblai, had lifted from Slievegallion, where Dara Mac Fachtura had hidden him in a glen when he moved the Brown Bull from Dunsevenik at the news of Maev's coming.

CHAPTER XV

LUGH had scarce driven his horses out through the flaming portals of the East when Cuchulain came to the pass of the Derg and found his three companies preparing their morning meal.

As he stepped down from his chariot, old Agnoman came forward and reported that scouts had just come in with tidings that Maev's host was still on the far bank of the river, but that men were busily employed clearing away the obstructions with which Cuchulain had entangled the ford.

It was now clear that Maev could not by any possible chance attack until mid-morning on the next day.

For awhile, Cuchulain stood in the mouth of the pass and considered deeply how this battle of the hundreds against the tens of thousands might best be fought.

In front of him lay the double waters of the Erne, shaped like a bow, the arm of the lake nearest to him which represented the wood, with the waters thickening to the hand grip almost at his feet, and perhaps a mile away a swiftly flowing stream which served for the bow string.

On either side of him the cliffs towered up rugged and gaunt, separated by some twenty-five or thirty paces for three-quarters of a mile, when the pass opened out to a space half a mile wide, with a hill some two hundred feet high in the centre, before narrowing down to its original width hard by the place at which the River Derg flows out from the Mountains of Donegal.

In Cuchulain's force there were fifty Romans, who had deserted from the legions and subsequently joined him as free companions, fifty wild Nubian archers, a hundred Norsemen, with old Agnoman at their head—fierce Vikings all—armed with great battle axes and hammers.

The remainder of his force was a heterogeneous assortment he had collected overseas and trained together as the Wanderers' Band.

Presently Cuchulain raised his head and spoke to Agnoman: "Whichever way things may befall, old sea-king, a glorious fight is before us, and but few of our three hundred men shall live to tell the tale of it; yet this is a good place to defend, and we may well hold back the host of Erin until Ulster is roused out to our aid, and this is how the battle shall be set. Before us lie the waters of Erne, around our feet lie the great rocks, and on either hand the walls rise up. Thou, with thy Norsemen shalt lie hid among the rocks and fall upon the foe while they are yet in the water. Behind thee, two hundred paces within the pass shall stand the Romans in a double line, and with them will I bide. Some way before us, high up on the cliffs, the Nubians must take their stand. The Wanderers' Band we will hold in reserve where the pass narrows again at the east to the Plains of Foyle beyond.

"Now thou shalt hold them at the ford for awhile, but not long enough to lose over many men. Then shalt thou break and flee back through our ranks and take thy stand upon the little hill in the midst of the pass. Against the Romans, Maev can send no more than a few hundred men at a time, and as they come the Nubians shall shoot on them and roll down great rocks from on high. For as long as may be we will hold the narrow way and die in our standing. When we are gone, the host will sweep on to engage thee upon the hill, and meanwhile the men of Ethiopia must draw back along the cliffs until they stand on either flank of the Wanderers. Here shalt thou make the last great stand with the Wanderers and such of the Norsemen as may be left, but they, I think, will be few indeed. I would now that thou callest together the men by the place of the little hill, that I may tell them how this matter shall go."

As Cuchulain walked away towards the hill, a sound of deep voices singing was heard from the Northern end of the pass; for a moment he stood and listened, fearing

greatly lest by a ruse Maev had sent some of her men round to take him in rear. Silent he stood for a moment with head bent, listening, and then strode quickly away up the defile with great joy in his heart, for he had heard and recognised the marching song of the men of Cullan the Smith of Quelgny, and knew by that token that the Curse of Macha was passed and spent. A minute later Cullan himself rode into sight with all his fighting tail—a hundred trusty swords—at his back. Quickly the news ran from mouth to mouth as to who the new comers were, and a mighty cheer split itself to fragments on the rocks as Laeg spread the tale.

It was a joyous meeting between the Hound of Cullan and his Master after all the years that had gone since the little lad had stood guard over the dūn of Quelgny.

“Tell me, Cullan,” said Cuchulain, after the first greetings were over, “dost thou come alone or but as the advanced guard of the host of Ulster?”

“I know naught of the host of Ulster,” replied Cullan the Smith, “but this I know, the Curse of Macha passes, and I came hot foot to thine aid as soon as a man could stir.”

As they talked upon the slopes of the hill in the midst of the pass, Cuchulain’s little force assembled.

First came the Nubians, their great black bows standing up over their left shoulders and their quivers, full of well-fledged arrows, banging against their right thighs as they marched. Next came the Romans, and as they halted in line they heaved up their spears, shouting “Ave! Ave!” Behind them at a run came the Norsemen. Halting, they banged axe upon target and gave “Waes Hael” to their lord, but the Wanderers shouted “Skall,” and then all stood silent in their ranks waiting for Cuchulain to speak.

“Cullan, my Master,” said he, “ye are come in a lucky hour to fend the land we love. Ulster lays open behind us, and before us lie the foe. Great deeds may come of this, for ours it is to hold the pass until the men of Ultonia, newly recovered from their pains, shall rise out to our aid. Cullan and I and his men stand

here as in duty bound to strike for the homes that gave us birth, but thou Agnoman, and ye my shield mates from overseas, come forth to fight, not for the quarrel's sake, but for very love of fighting and of me who have led ye many a time and oft when we rode the sea-horses together over the swans' bath. Many fights have we fought—good fights—but it comes to me that this shall be the last and goodliest fight of all, and here in this gut in the hills shall our company be disbanded by Death.

“Against us come more than fifty thousand of the bravest blades of Erin, while we number but twenty score. Still, we have fought shoulder to shoulder as good brethren should, and levelled the odds aforetime. The pass we hold is good for defence, our hearts are bold within us and our weapons are keen in our hands. The odds are over long for levelling; yet if ye be willing, may we still do a deed which shall live in song and story while hearth-stone shall redden to the fire and skalds' fingers pluck at harp strings. Say! will ye do this thing? or shall it be said that we, who have been together, fair tide and foul, in captivity and in freedom, parted at last in the shadow of Death! Say shipmates, shield-mates, breed of the sea cocks, go ye home in safety to a new service, or do ye follow the sword of the Hound once more?”

“We follow the Hound,” they yelled; “lead on; to the death we follow!”

“Valhalla waits!” cried old Agnoman, shaking his great axe till it flashed in the sun, “and Bifrost Bridge shall be thronged 'ere this tale be told.”

“Bravely spoken, hearts o' gold,” laughed Cuchulain; “'tis but as I knew ye would answer. Listen, then! for in this wise shall we fight. The waters are deep on either side of the ford of Erne, and thou, Agnoman, shalt fall upon the foe as they come; the neck of the pass is narrow, and there bide I with the Romans, and behind us shall stand Cullan and his pack to charge in when we break or die.”

"We die, but we break not," yelled the Romans.

"Aye! ye'll stand to it, I know," laughed Cuchulain, and then continued, "the archers shall shoot from either cliff and roll down rocks as the foe come against us, and after we are fordone, the remnants shall give back until they stand with Agnoman and the Norsemen on this hill; and in the other end of the pass to the North shall the Wanderers' Company await to meet the final shock, and theirs it is to stand firm while a man is alive, and above them shall be set the archers to shoot down our foes until the arms are too weary to pull the bow strings and the arrows are all spent. I have finished! Go now, my comrades, rest and prepare for war, and to-night sleep on thy spears!"

Then the companies marched away to make ready, and as they went the Norsemen sang the song of Odin and Thor, the song of the sea cocks, which runs:—

Waes hael! Waes hael! Waes hael! *

Shout for the mighty Woden!

Ho! for the blood red war!

Up with the mead in flowing bowl,

Drink to the Thundering Thor!

See where Sable Raven

Floats o'er Vikings free;

Lords of Life and Death we roam

Monarchs of the sea.

Dread Valkyries shield us

As our dragons speed,

All the world before us

We follow Glory's lead.

Scourge of Southern Saxons,

Dread of Anglia's shore,

Deep in heart of Erin

Hear our battle roar.

* For this song I am gratefully indebted to Charles H. Ashdown, F.G.S.—Author.

Odin's sons of Freedom,
Great Valhalla's halls,
Shout then comrade Vikings!
Shout, for glory calls.

That night as Cuchulain went the round of the sentries and passed through the ranks of the sleeping warriors who seemed to lie like men already dead in the stark moonlight, he said to Cullan, who accompanied him:

"Tell me, friend! 'ere yet the Allfather of Light hath veiled his face in his mantle once again, how many say ye of those who sleep whole limbed to-night, shall see his glory mount in the East a second time?"

"Nay, Cuchulain, it is more than man may tell!"

"It is strange to think," went on Cuchulain, as if the other had not spoken, "what strange tricks Fate doth play us. All those who sleep, black and white alike, had mothers who crooned o'er them as they lay nestled to the mumbled breast. What hopes were builded for them, on what path of high emprise may their wayward feet not have been set! Some of them have wives and little children far away! What think ye! do they reckon of the warriors who to-night sleep on their spears? And what of the warriors themselves! Do their hands clutch at their safeguards with thoughts of bloody deeds the morrow shall bring; doth the battle cry lurk ready behind their clenched teeth, or is there perchance love and peace in the hearts of some, thoughts of mother-quiet and sheltering homesteads where the young vines join hands above the door? See this grim old warrior, scarred with the marks of a hundred fights, see how starkly he smiles and how fondly his hand caresseth the haft of his axe as it were almost the tender palm of a maid's hand; and mark yon fair-haired Dane, the bloom of youth is on his cheek, and he too smiles, but his lips frame gentleness, and surely it is of love and mating that he murmurs, and although his head is pillowed on a buckler, it is of the white breast of the girscha who waits for him by the Trondhjem fiord that he dreams.

"Why is it, tell me, thou who hast lived so long, that

we are born on a welter of sword blades to die in a sea of blood?

"In the far East a wise man told me of the coming of a Great White Lord who should rend the Stone of Sacrifice, and before whose Sign of a Cross should bow down Miölnir the Hammer of Thor whom the Dane-folk worship. He told me that wars should pass at the word of this great Lord, and the world be ruled by Love and not by the sword after His coming.

"Ah well! what matters it, bloody-minded and love-lorn, both may have gone to solve the great mystery 'fore ever the White Lord comes out of the East."

No bugles roused the morn, next day and no cooking fires sent up their smoke on high, but quietly the companies stole down to their appointed places and lay down in concealment. The pickets of yesternight were drawn in, and the mouth of the Pass yawned black and forbidding between the walls of rock.

Hour after hour passed, until at last the hundreds of watching eyes saw flashes of light across the plain as the spear heads caught the sun rays, and thus they knew that the host of Maev drew on.

Right across the plain wound the foe in three vast columns, the murmur of the myriad tramping feet and hoofs clearly discernible a great way off. The right and left columns halt, but the centre column comes on, and in it are perhaps twenty thousand men. Across the first waters of the Erne they pass, orderly company by orderly company; two-thirds of them mass upon the bank, and the other third splits up into three smaller columns and advances to where the waters form the bow. Now the columns converge until they come to the ford where the grip of the bow shaft rests, so that they march down the bank and into the water twelve abreast. Still the defenders of the pass make no sign.

It almost seems to the men of Erin that Cuchulain is fled and the pass left open to them, but only for a moment are they left in doubt, for there is a rustling

among the rocks as the Norsemen rise up; ere they charge they break into their war song:

Ho! for the mighty Woden.
Ho! for the Thundering Thor.
Up with the mead in flowing bowl;
Drink to blood-red war!

“Ye shall drink deep of blood to-day, ye sea wolves!” yells old Agnoman, as he heads the charge and rushes straight down upon the foe. After him rage the bearsarkers, yelling and leaping from rock to rock. The sunlight flashes in their floating yellow hair beneath the winged helmets and on the weapons they hold on high with bronzed, torque-gilded arms. A brave foe awaits them, and a roar of welcome goes up from the men at the ford as they see their foemen come. The head of the column reels with the force of impact, and up leap the blood-tinged waves on either hand as men are hurled from the narrow causeway into the depths. There are sounds as of meat chopped on a block and hammers busy on anvils, as they strike and strive waist deep in the turgid water.

Thrice the Norsemen charge, and thrice the column reels back under their onslaught, but men are falling fast, too fast Agnoman thinks, and his bull voice rings out, bidding the Norsemen flee. For a moment they hesitate and then run back, turning to strike here and there like an old dog fox that snaps back over his shoulder when the hounds are close upon him.

Swift in pursuit leap the men of Erin, but they have the bank to climb, and the last Norseman is vanishing as they rush into the mouth of the gorge, and there they halt and draw back, for before them stands the double line of Romans, their oblong shields a steady wall bristling with spears held firm by the leather-clad right arms; on their legs are guards of iron, and on their heads brazen helmets above stern impassive faces. In the centre of the front rank stands the Glory of the North—Cuchulain—a dark handsome youth; the tunic under his

byrnie is white, a crimson cloak clasped by a great gold brooch is thrown back from his shoulders, and a hood of white linen, gold embroidered, falls back from his helm; on his left arm is a great red shield, silver rimmed, and strangely embossed in gold with the images of beasts and men. In his right hand he holds an axe, light but strong and beautifully balanced. His look is fierce, and around his head there seems to shine the hero light. No wonder is it that the attackers give back from before his face, but it is useless for them to tarry, for those behind press on, nor is the initiative left with them, for Cuchulain lifts up his axe and shouts:

“What, brethren, must we wait all day for these laggards? Forward, and drive them out!”

No wild bearsark rush, beloved of the Northerners, is here, but the steady disciplined advance of the trained legionaries. Terrible was the onslaught of the fierce Vikings, but far more terrible is the inexorable, relentless advance of those swarthy cold-faced men. The men of Erin strike at them and strike again; where a man falls he may lie, and a comrade from the rank behind steps up and takes his place. Slowly the head of the column rears up and falls back on itself, and so great is the press of those behind that it scarce seems possible for the Romans to move, and yet ever Cuchulain's axe sweeps a path before him, and ever the men take a pace forward as they thrust their foemen underfoot. Not a sound comes from them as they force their way, until at last they stand in the Mouth of the Pass in the full light of the morning sun.

There is something uncanny—awful—about their purposeful dispassionate mastery!

Cuchulain longs for the blithe fray and the ringing blows, but still no fierce assault shakes his ordered ranks. At last he can wait no longer. He springs six clear paces out into the open, and instantly, as if at the spoken word, the line behind him bows outwards into the arc of a circle.

And now the attack comes in earnest; rank upon rank the foes charge up the slope, and each succeeding rank

breaks itself in fruitless ragings like storm-driven waves beating on a rocky coast.

At last they pause amazed, gazing on that implacable array. The ranks are thinned, it is true, but still Cuchulain's axe thunders and flames in the forefront of the battle. Gone are cloak and hood, cast aside in the heat of the fight; his axe is red from blade to hand-hold, and wounds gape upon his arms. Around him stand the indomitable Romans—what can shake those men of iron?

Troops are hurled against them fresh and newly fresh, and still they stand firm, but the end is close now, for not twenty of them are left to back that gleaming axe. Lewey charges home at the head of the Munster men, and Cuchulain goes down stunned, and now Cullan deems it time to loose his own men to the fray. With a rattle of scurrying feet that spurn loose stones, they tear down the defile and hurl themselves on the foe. Right through the attackers they dash straight on into the heart of the host; never was such a charge as those Ulstermen made when they struck for hearth and home. Across the ford they broke and buried themselves deep in the waiting masses; for a long time the Romans, leaning silent upon their spears within the mouth of the pass, saw the ranks of Erin heave and turn and shudder as they struck and struck at this evil within their very vitals. Long time the swords flashed up and fell, and long time the hammer of the Smith rose up on high. Then all was still and a hundred men had sunk down into the red flood-tide of war from which never a one of them rose more.

The Romans picked up their leader and climbed back up the defile to where Agnoman was waiting with the Norsemen on the hill.

Scarcely had they gone when Lewey led the Munstermen forward into the gorge. No sooner were they well between the walls than such a stream of arrows and rocks poured down on them from the waiting Nubians, as caused them to beat a hasty retreat, and for that day the fight was ended.

Meanwhile, on the summit of the hill, Cuchulain had recovered consciousness. Sending for Laeg, he bade him drive hard to Emain Macha and tell King Conor that they might hold out at the pass for two, or possibly three, days more if he would assemble as many war chariots as he could and send them with all possible speed to bring help to the holders of the pass.

And now Agnoman begged Cuchulain to go back with his twenty Romans and rest through the morrow's battle with the Wanderers, but this he would not do, though he bade the Romans go and join their comrades at the Northern end of the pass. Although every one of the twenty bore wounds upon him, not one would leave Cuchulain.

"Lord," said an old war-worn Centurion, "from my boyhood up have I followed the Eagles. In twenty pitched battles have I bared my blade and in skirmishes innumerable, but never before have mine eyes looked upon such a leader of men as thou art. Hadst thou served in the great army thou hadst been borne on the shields of the legions to sit on Cæsar's throne, yet may'st thou count the gain well lost for this day's fight, but we leave thee no more; rather would we open our veins than fail to stand around thee in to-morrow's fray. Glorious hath been the fight to-day and glorious shall be the fight to-morrow; and if thou must fall, we will fall with thee, for such men as thee live on the earth no more, and having served thee best, 'twere ill to serve another master."

"Bravely spoken," said Cuchulain; "thou shalt stand with me in the forefront of the battle as thou dost desire. And now, Agnoman, send and withdraw the bowmen from the cliffs, I beg of thee, lest they be cut off in the night time like birds snared sleeping on their perches. Also set a small guard to watch Lewey and his men so that they steal not on us in the darkness unawares."

About the hour of dawn Cuchulain rose, and taking the old Roman Centurion with him, he went to post the Nubians on the hills on either side of the gorge, so that they might with their arrows prevent the hosts of Maev

from slipping in safety round the base of the hill in the centre, to attack the band of the Wanderers in the northern neck of the pass.

When they returned they found that old Agnoman had set his men in a double ring about half way up the hill where they were lying down in their ranks; in the very centre of the front rank facing down the valley lay the Romans. The old Centurion saluted and turned away to join them, but "Not so!" said Cuchulain; "to-day, brave heart, thou shalt stand on my left hand and Agnoman on my right, for we be equal chiefs in war."

The old man flushed red with pleasure and said, "It shall be as Cæsar wills," and he stretched forth his hand in the Emperor's salute. Even as he did so the great host of Erin came pouring into the open space, and when they saw them, the Norsemen rose up in their ring, and up rose the Romans too. They gazed on that vast multitude of foes and knew that death was very near, so they too looked towards Cuchulain and gave him the gladiator's royal salute, "Ave, Cæsar! morituri te salutat!"

The red rim of the wintry sun was pushing itself above the ridge of hills to the defenders' left, around their feet lay the white rocks, and above their heads stretched the deep blue of the cloudless sky, wherein a solitary eagle circled and poised as he searched for prey.

Fronting the hill lay the host of Erin, a motley gathering of clansmen, different in type and mode of life; the men of Connacht, as far apart from the wild men of Leinster as two races from the uttermost ends of the earth, and yet all drawn together in one common purpose—the spoiling of Ulster.

The morning sun flashed back from sword and spear blades, and banners waved above the thickly-clustering throng.

In the hush of morning a shouted word of command rang out like a snapping beam, and instantly three columns moved out from the host. One went to the right, one to the left and the other came straight on, and as they came, the Nubians sprang to their feet, pouring

down volley after volley of whistling arrows, and still the columns pressed on, till nothing could live amidst that hail of death. The outer columns keep bravely on, but at last they halt, hesitate and finally give back, leaving a vast litter of dead and wounded behind them; the centre column, unharrassed by bowmen, reaches the foot of the hill up which the attackers begin to climb. The air is full of their cries, the ground shakes to the thunder of their feet as up the slope they charge, until they are met by a blinding storm of hard flung javelins; whole ranks go down in a whirl of mad confusion, men crash to the ground, where some lie very still, and others rise up and stagger on or back. For ten long minutes it goes on, and then the attackers break and fly amidst the hoots and jeers of the Northmen, who leap out of their ring in bearsark fury to pursue, but a warning shout from Cuchulain and a steadying hand on Agnoman's arm stays them.

There is to be little rest for the defenders, for already a fourth column is pushing its way up the slopes of the hill, and all the javelins have been flung. Up the slope the attackers surge until they are face to face with that grim ring. As the battle joins the fierce Northern battle cry, "Valhalla! Valhalla! Victory or Valhalla!" crashes in that enclosed space amidst the ringing of the falling weapons.

The fight hangs doubtful as the axes are plied by lusty arms; for a long time the fell struggle is evenly sustained; time and again the double ring is strained inwards almost to breaking point, but it breaks not. Agnoman is down, bleeding from a dozen wounds; fallen too is the Centurion, a sword point standing out a hand's breadth behind his shoulder-blade. Still the fight goes on as rank upon rank of fresh foes join the attack, until the arms that wield the axes are so weary that death must soon be the portion of the Northmen if no aid comes, yet ever where the fight rages thickest, Cuchulain's axe is aloft.

And now the men of Erin stand off for a while, drawing

deep breaths as they gaze in wonder and admiration at this stubborn little band.

Meanwhile Fiacha Mac Firaba, with his 3,000 spearmen, is creeping along the heights on either side of the gorge, driving in the archers before him.

Soon fresh warriors in the valley gather thickly for what must be the last act of this drama of slaughter, but even as they are launched to the fray, a high shrill cheer echoes from the Northern neck of the Pass. It is the Boy Corps of Emania. Sualtam has raised them as he passed to the Court of King Conor Mac Nessa. Day and night Follaman, the King's young son, had led them, and now they have arrived in time to bear their part in the last great stand. But are they in time? Already foes are swarming up the hill on every side as the Boy Corps make their charge. Through the foe they dash, and turning about, strengthen the hardly-dying ring of Northmen.

Maev sees this fresh reinforcement come, and to quell it she sends forward yet another thousand men. Naught now can avail, and there that gallant little band, war-seasoned warriors and unfledged lads alike, die in their standing. And now Cuchulain is down.

Still all is not yet over, for this ruthless, wanton slaughter is more than Fiacha Mac Firaba can bear to see, and now, when the victory of the men of Erin seems well assured, he comes charging down from the heights with his 3,000 spearmen and rings around his old comrade Cuchulain and the remnants of his force. He has saved the day, but he is too late to save the lives of those who fought so stubbornly. Cuchulain appears to be dying, the Romans are all dead; of the Northmen but six remain, and of the Boy Corps, none. Sudden was their entry into the fray, brief the stand they made, and swift the death that found them.

For that day all the heart for fight is out of Maev's host as they draw off sullenly to the southern end of the Pass, while Maev curses Fiacha bitterly for his treachery.

Night comes down, poured into the gorge like ink into the palm of the seer who practises black magic, and one

by one the twinkling camp fires of the host of Erin sparkle up in the darkness, but Cuchulain stirs not nor moves. Hour after hour he lies with his head in Fiacha's lap breathing stertorously. Every known means has been tried to bring back his wandering wits since they bore him away from the hill of death and laid him here by the grave of Lerga on the open plain beyond the northern neck of the Pass.

As he lay there the moon rose up and revealed the men of Erin seated around their camp fires far down the gorge.

Now a strange thing must be told. Long time Fiacha sat there with his comrade's head in his lap, musing on the days when, with Cuchulain, he had first learned the profession of arms in the Boy Corps of Emain Macha, for this Fiacha was one of the exiles from Emania who had joined the host of Maev after the slaying of the sons of Usna. Presently, as he sat and watched, he saw the wondrous form of a great man clad in a tunic of white silk embroidered in gold, and about whose shoulders was a cloak of emerald green clasped with a silver buckle, passing through the host of Erin, in his right hand were two spears. On his left arm was a black buckler bound with silver, and around him shone a glow as of the sun.

Straight through the host this being passed, but never a head was turned to gaze upon him, though the mystic light around him lit the path he trod. Right through the camp fires he strode, and ever the flames died out beneath his feet, but sprang to life again as he passed. Right up the gorge he came and through the ranks of the Wanderers' Company, yet no single man challenged his presence. Soon he stood by the grave-mound of Lerga and gazed down upon the spent and wounded warrior; for minutes he gazed down nor spoke a word, but at last he bent and touched Cuchulain on the brow, saying as he did so, "Awake, my son," and instantly Cuchulain opened his eyes, asking:

"Who speaks to me and calls me son?"

"It is thy true father, Lugh Mac Ethlin," said the being.

"The God of Light," gasped Fiacha, rising to his feet; but the Being heeded not the interruption. Speaking sweetly to his son he went on:

"By reason of thy half-divine birth the curse of Macha fell not upon thee, yet in all else art thou mortal, and as mortal thou hast fought and watched bravely through these many days; yet had Fiacha not come to thine aid the watching had been vain. Now art thou weary, spent with wounds. Sleep then and take thy rest, for I am come from my high home among the people of Dana to take thy place awhile."

As he finished speaking he touched Cuchulain again on the brow, and straightway the wounded hero sank back in a deep, untroubled slumber. Then Lugh laid healing simples on the wounds.

At daybreak Maev launched her host to the attack once more, but the Wanderers' Company and the spearmen of Fiacha, led by that radiant being, hurled them back with great loss. Nor did they attack again, for Maev called together a council of the princes and chieftains, and told them that as she now had the Brown Bull of Quelgny, they might return to their homes. This they would in no wise do, saying that she had promised them great profit from the spoiling of Ulster, and although she had undoubtedly attained her object by capturing the bull, they had nothing to show for the raid but grievous wounds and a long tally of warriors slain. So it was decided that the host should withdraw from the pass of the Derg and march South and East to Meath, to see if they might come to Emain Macha while the host of Conor was marching West to the aid of Cuchulain.

That day then, they set off on their march of a hundred miles or so to the new point of attack. And while they were marching South and East, Cuchulain slept and his wounds healed up. On the third day he awoke whole and refreshed to find not Lugh but Laeg leaning over him, and beside him Fiacha Mac Firaba.

"Where is my father?" was Cuchulain's first question.

"Passed upwards on the path of the sunbeam at earliest dawn," replied Fiacha.

“And what of thy mission, Laeg?” Cuchulain next asked.

“This of my mission, Lord!” Laeg answered. “Ulster is roused, and when I left Emain Macha, a great host was gathering, but thy father is dead.”

“Nay!” said Cuchulain proudly. “My Father lives now and forever. See where he drives his flaming chariot across the sky from the portals of the dawn till he beds his team at even in the stables of night. But say, how died Sualtam?”

“Lord, after he left us the bodach rode hard and fast through the land, crying, ‘Arise, ye men of Ulster and buckle on thy war gear; foes come to slay thee in thy weakness; the thatch of thy byres shall serve to light the fires of their camps; thy women folk and children they will sell into slavery and thy cattle carry off!’ Yet no man heeded him until he came to the quarters of the Boy Corps, for the Curse of Macha worked its will on the men folk; but Prince Follaman and the lads who had not yet come to their manhood and were therefore untouched by the curse, set out forthwith to thy aid, and now all, all are slain.”

At these dire tidings a great groan burst from Cuchulain’s lips, but he motioned to Laeg to continue his tale.

“At last Sualtam came to the King’s dūn, and there he found all the great nobles of Ultonia assembled, but not one of them meet for fight. Nevertheless Sualtam reasoned with them and besought them to throw off their woman-weakness and take sword and shield for the honour of the land; but only Cathbad spoke, decreeing death to him who brought such evil news to the King in his agony. So the bodach mounted his horse again to ride away to see if help might be raised elsewhere, but as he rode out from the courtyard, the horse set its foot upon a discarded spear-head lying among the rubbish which no one had the strength to clear away.

“As the sharp point entered into the frog of the horse’s hoof the poor beast screamed and reared up, flinging Sualtam back so that his neck caught on the keen edge

of the shield slung upon his back and decapitated him. The horse galloped away with the headless trunk still firm in the saddle, and was seen no more.

"It is told at Emania that as the head lay upon the ground it still continued to cry its warning, so Cathbad dragged himself to where it lay, and coming back he set the horrid trophy upon the Sacred Pillar in the midst of the hall.

"Blood welled out from the veins and ran down the sides of the column, and the great black beard flowed down in front while the white lips continued to move, uttering their interminable warning, until at last, when the oft-repeated words sank into men's minds, first one and then another cast off his lassitude; as the full realisation of all the message meant came home to them, their eyes glared, their cheeks flamed, and their hands went feeling for their swords.

"Conall of the Victories staggered to his feet and dared to shake the King's majesty roughly by the shoulder; at the touch the mists cleared from Conor's brain, and he swore a mighty oath: 'The heavens are above us, the earth beneath us, and the sea is around us, and surely, unless the heavens fall on us and the earth gape to swallow us up, and the sea overwhelm the earth, I will restore every woman to her hearth and every cow to its byre.'*

"At this the champions raised their voices in acclamation and true affection, the first they had shown to their King since the slaying of the Sons of Usna.

"Straightway the King bade Cathbad the Druid cast a horoscope, which he did, and pronounced that the arms of Ulster should prevail against the invaders.

"And now I saw the messengers of the King sped to all the four quarters of the province, bidding the warriors arm and prepare themselves for war. Meanwhile Conall of the Victories raised every spear he could, and next morning marched Westwards towards Cuilcagh, as thou

* "Myths and Legends of the Celtic Race," T. W. Rolleston.

didst direct, Lord. But three days elapsed before the full host of Ulster was gathered at Emain Macha, and just as they were marshalled and prepared to march in Conall's tracks, word came that the host of Maev had moved Eastwards and was already approaching Cavan. As I left the Royal House of the Red Branch, the dwellings echoed to the tramping feet as King Conor and the Lord Keltchar, son of Uthecar Hornskin, led the warriors out and away; but as I went, the King called to me, bidding me tell thee that he will march with all speed to the Plain of Garach and there await the onslaught of the host of Erin.

"On my way hither I passed the Lord Conall with his men, and long ere the sun hath set, they will stand before thee."

Cuchulain heard Laeg's tale out to the end, and then turning to Fiacha, he thanked him for his timely aid, and asked for Agnoman and the Centurion.

"Alas!" said Fiacha, "they have passed beyond the Light and will be seen no more, but brace thyself to hear worse tidings yet, for know that at the last of the fight, the Boy Corps of Emania marched in through the northern neck of the Pass, and, flinging themselves valiantly into the battle, fought and fell."

"All of them?" queried Cuchulain.

"All, all are slain," answered Fiacha.

Without a word Cuchulain departed into the hills where he sat alone and mourned, for Cullan was dead, dead too were Agnoman and the Centurion; disbanded by the great General Death was the Boy Corps, and of his own fighting tail but a handful of the Northmen and the Company of the Wanderers remained alive, with perhaps a dozen of the Nubians.

Truly victory was his, but at what a price had it been bought!

Late that night Conall and his men marched into the Gorge, and it was then decided that on the morrow they should march with the remainder of Cuchulain's band and with Fiacha's spearmen in the track of Maev's host,

to fall upon them in rear on the Plain of Garach if possible.

But as they marched there was sorrow in the hero's heart, the joy of fight had died out of him, for Fergus and Ferdia fought on the other side, and of all those boon companions who had sailed the seas with him, barely a hundred remained.

CHAPTER XVI

WHEN the host of Erin came to Cavan, Maev sent sixteen hundred men under Prince Cormac North towards Emain Macha, to reconnoitre the land for the advance into Ulster. Ferdia with a hundred of the Ulster exiles, she sent to wait at the ford of the River Dee to cover her march with the main force to the Hill of Slane, where she would await tidings.

The force under Cormac pushed rapidly forward, raiding and ravishing as they went, and, finding none to stay their progress, were returning with a great spoil of cattle and women slaves when they fell in with Cuchulain and Conall, who rapidly drove them North again until their further progress was barred by King Conor.

Caught thus between two hostile forces, Cormac turned at bay, fighting very valiantly until he was slain and all his sixteen hundred warriors with him. The captives and cattle Conor returned under guard to their homes, and thus did he begin to fulfil that oath which he had sworn when the Curse of Macha passed from him.

And now Cuchulain and Conall pushed on with their men as the advance guard to the King's army. In due course they came to the ford on the River Dee, and there they found Ferdia awaiting them.

Conall would have pushed forward to carry the ford by storm, but Ferdia, still sore of temper from his wounds, challenged Cuchulain to single combat, that the fight they had already commenced far away might be fought to its predestined end, and the shame of a beaten man be removed from him.

"Oh Ferdia!" cried Cuchulain, across the ford, "surely thou dost not bear malice for that which befell in a quarrel of thine own seeking?"

"No malice lurks within my heart," answered Ferdia,

"but if this matter be not settled, then shame shall be my portion for ever."

Still Cuchulain was unwilling for this fight, not because he feared the issue, but because it was the breaking off of ties of love made long ago, and it must be a fight to the death—one of them would never wield weapons again when it was finished.

Then Ferdia, seeing his unwillingness, began to mock him and to ask, as he performed feats of skill with his weapons, if he had forgotten the war-craft Skatha had taught him, and become woman-soft in the arms of Emer.

Now Cuchulain's battle fury was roused as Ferdia had intended, and he rushed into the ford brandishing the axe with which he had fought at the battle of the Pass, but Ferdia caught the blow on his shield and hurled Cuchulain back into the water. For a long time they strove and neither had the advantage over the other, and now the men of Ferdia began to mock Cuchulain, saying: "Is this truly the mighty man who held the Pass?"

At that mocking he turned bearsark in his rage, and, taking the Gae Bolg he drove it against Ferdia with all his might. Right through shield and shirt of mail it pierced, right into the stomach of Ferdia, so that he fell down dying in the water, but Cuchulain caught him in his arms as he fell and carried him over to his own bank so that he might die in the midst of the men of Ulster.

As Ferdia lay dying, Cuchulain dropped beside him in a swoon of grief, so that he was spared the sight of his friend's death. Nor did he rouse in time to see his comrades force the passage of the ford and march forward into Meath with tumult and rejoicing and with blood-red spears and swords tossing on high. From the day of the slaying of Ferdia, that place was known as Ath Ferdia or Ardee*, in memory of the fallen hero.

When he recovered consciousness Cuchulain and his men dug a grave for Ferdia, and over him they built a

* Ardee is in the southern borders of the Plain of Murthemney, in County Louth.

great mound surmounted by a pillar stone, whereon they carved in Ogham writing the Sleeper's name and the lineage of his house.

On the Hill of Slane no word came to Maev from the raiders she had sent forward under Cormac, nor from Ferdia at the ford on the Dee, so she sent out a party of scouts under that Mac Roth, who had first told her of the Brown Bull of Quelgny. These came back swiftly enough, saying that the plains were choked with flying beasts of the chase; and the woods, from whence they had been driven, echoed with the tramp of marching men, while the very air shook to the lilt of their war songs, which rose high above the rumble of a thousand thousand chariot wheels, as they passed from the woods into the Plain of Garach.

Maev turned to Fergus who stood beside her.

"Tell me, Fergus," she said, "is the great army that marches, the full hosting of Ulster?"

"Nay, Queen, that is more than I can say," answered he, adding significantly, "but it may well be that such a force will suffice, for in all the world, from the Pillars of Hercules to the Land of Ice, there are no such valiant warriors as those of Ultonia, fighting in defence of their homes."

That night the hosts lay over against each other, the men of Ulster on the plain under the shadows of the flat-topped Maela of Meath, and the men of Erin on the Hill of Slane; but at first peep of day they too marched down into the Plain of Garach.

Now it were too long to tell of the mighty deeds Fergus wrought with his famous sword "Caladcholg" the "Hard-dinter," in the battle which ensued, and of how Cuchulain came into the fight and turned the tide of war by bidding Fergus fly from before his face as he was pledged to do; whereon he fled and with him went the Firbolgs and the men of Leinster and Munster, so that Ailell and Maev were left alone with the men of Connacht to bear the brunt of the fighting, and thus the day was lost to them. But the victory cost Conor dear, for his son Cuscriid fell in it, and for his heir remained only the

little infant Dalan, who had been born to him of Deirdre, and whom some said was the son of Naisi.

Now at the end of the day, Ailell and Maev fled the stricken field, and as they fled they came up with Ket and Anluan, the sons of Maga and besought them to stand with all that was left to them of their three thousand swordsmen, and cover the retreat, for Conor was close upon their track.

So it befell that the advance of the victorious host of Ulster was checked by the sons of Maga in West Meath, and in that fight Anluan was wounded; but Ket avenged his brother, for, seeing King Conor in the forefront of the battle, he slung a brain-ball at him which, striking him full in the forehead, penetrated the skull, wherefore the place is called Athnurchar—"The Ford of the Sling-cast," to this day.

After this disaster the Ultonians ceased to pursue, and returned to Emain Macha, carrying their wounded King with them. Though they had scant hope of his recovery, Fingen, the King's physician, was summoned to attend his master when they came to the Red Branch Hostel.

For a long time Fingen pondered over the matter, and then pronounced it impossible to extract the brain-ball, but said that if the skin were sewn up over the hole and the King kept himself quiet and refrained from all violent exertion and excitement, he might yet live many years.

Meanwhile Cuchulain, with a score of chariots, followed hard on the track of the host of Connacht, until at last he came upon a shattered chariot by the wayside, and under it crouched the great Queen Maev, her pride now humbled in the dust.

"Ah! slay me not, thou Glory of the North!" cried she as Cuchulain leapt down from his chariot and strode to her side.

"It is not my custom to war with women," said Cuchulain briefly.

"Yet rather would I die at thy hand, or mine own, than be carried captive to Conor, lest the fate of Deirdre be mine also," she pleaded.

"Nay, lady; thou mayst go free for me," said the hero softly.

At this the other warriors of Ulster who had joined in the pursuit with him cried out savagely, some saying that she should be slain forthwith, and others, that they would carry her in triumph to Emain Macha. But the hubbub stilled to silence as Cuchulain turned fiercely upon them.

"Respect to fallen Majesty," he said in a voice of icy calm. "The man who lifts hand against the Queen answers to me for it!" Then as they still murmured he turned to Maev and said, "Majesty! will it please thee to mount up into my chariot?" Together they drove away to Athlone, where he took her across the Shannon, and left her to make the best of her way to Rathcrogan, eighteen miles away. Then, turning about, he drove straight back to his home in Murthemney, for his heart was still bitter against King Conor, and he would not go to Emain Macha; but home was nigh on seventy miles away and the horses spent with the galloping to and fro in the conflict.

On the evening of the day after the battle of Garach, Emer was sitting in the hall of Cuchulain's dūn spinning and singing softly to herself. She was alone, for Dectera had driven out to see if any tidings could be obtained of how the war went.

The buzz of the humming wheel drowned all sounds from without, but presently Emer seemed to feel a presence within the room. Looking up she saw Cuchulain standing just within the door. With a low glad cry she rose and went to him.

It was the first sight he had had of her for many long days—more like years it seemed, so much had he passed through—and his heart leaped within his breast, a flush mantled his cheeks and then died away, for he was strangely shy and reverent to women for one who dwelt in that rough age; moreover, his whole fine simple nature adored Emer with a great and lasting love that overshadowed everything else in his life and surrounded her with a halo of glory and perfection in his eyes.

No word he said as she came towards him, but simply waited and then gathered her up in his strong arms in a passionate yet tender embrace.

But Emer was not silent after the first rapture of welcome was over, for she gave thanks to the powers of Light with all her soul for the safe return of her warrior-husband. Then they sat together hand in hand in the gathering gloom while Cuchulain told the tale of the saving of Ulster, and thus Dectera found them when she returned from her search for news.

A week passed during which Cuchulain rested and allowed his wounds to heal.

Great peace he found in the presence of his wife, but inwardly he sorrowed for the death of Ferdia by his hands. On the eighth day, messengers came from the King bidding him to Emain Macha, where the Princes and Chieftains of the Red Branch Hostel were gathering to discuss terms of peace with Ailell and Maev and the Chieftains of Connacht. Now Cuchulain was unwilling to go to Emania, but he was most anxious that no peace should be made which might harm Fergus Mac Roy and the other exiles from Ulster who had fought on Maev's side in the battles. Therefore he made ready to go, and the next morning departed; but first he clothed himself as became a great noble journeying to the Court of the King.

Over his body armour he wore a tunic of pure silk embroidered with gold, and on his head was set a crested helmet studded with beautiful gems, which he had won at the games overseas. At his side hung his gold hilted, jewel encrusted, sword, and behind the chariot rode two of his Nubians bearing his spear and shield. With them rode a mighty Norseman bearing his axe.

When he arrived at Emain Macha the Council of Princes and Chieftains was already assembled in the great hall of the dūn, and a seat was reserved for him at the King's right hand in honour of the service he had rendered the land by holding the Pass.

As he came up the hall, the warriors rose to their feet and hailed him, "Welcome, thou Splendour

of Ulster, Glory of the North, Watcher by the Fords, Hound of Cullan." As they hailed him the King beckoned to him, but taking no notice, Cuchulain strode across to where Conall stood and took his place beside him, whereat the King flushed angrily and the skin over the hole in his head where the brain-ball had entered, pulsed and throbbed so, that Fingen, who was ever at his side now, laid a warning hand upon his arm and pressed him back gently into his seat. As he sank down all the company resumed their seats also.

Presently there was a great stir at the far end of the hall as a flourish of trumpets announced the arrival of Ailell and Maev with the Princes and Chieftains of Connacht. When the royal pair stepped into the hall, the golden sunlight streaming in through the open door behind them, struck fire from Ailell's helm; but if it struck fire from the helm of Ailell, it was as nothing to the fiery glow of Maev's head, where the wandering sunbeams seemed to have entrapped themselves within her hair and to linger lovingly there to lighten awhile the gloom of the sombre hall. Behind the King and Queen walked the six Princes of Connacht, for of the seven Mainés, Orlam alone had been slain in the recent fighting. After the Princes walked Fergus Mac Roy alone at the head of the champions of Erin.

Half way up the hall the King and Queen of Connacht stopped and bent the knee to Conor Mac Nessa and then, looking around, they bowed to Cuchulain, firstly because they regarded him as the real defender of Ulster, and secondly, in gratitude for the kindness he had shown to Maev when she lay a captive in his hands.

Chairs were placed for Ailell and Maev facing the King of Ulster, and behind them stood the Princes and Fergus, while the Chieftains and Champions grouped themselves on the benches around.

King Conor spoke the words of greeting, and then Queen Maev rose to open the council of peace.

"High King of Ulster, and thou my Lords and Champions," said she, "we are come to thy court this day

under safeguard of thy sacred oath, but not as vanquished foemen to hansel for peace, but rather as the leaders of great armies in the field, to discuss terms. True thou hast prevailed in the first onset, yet our host is not so scattered but that it may be brought together again and the fight fought out to the bitter end if need be. Yet the shadow of war hath lain heavy on the lands, thy land and ours, and for too long a time fire and a bloody sword have ruled the borders between us. Strong blows have been struck, strong men have fallen, and with them in the passing hour have gone matrons, blithe maids, and sweet eyed children. Nor have we had great profit of the raid, for know ye that the Red Bull of Ailell—the famous Finnebach—is dead, and dead with him is the Brown Bull of Quelgny, for they have destroyed each other. Say then, ye champions of Ulster, what terms of peace offer ye to Connacht and her brother provinces leagued in arms? ”

As she finished speaking, Maev sank down into her seat amidst a murmur of approval from her followers, which was quickly hushed as King Conor rose to name the terms. “The terms of peace are already set in our minds,” began the King; “but, lest they seem over onerous in thy eyes, ye rulers and chieftains of Connacht, I would first set forth the case ere naming the terms.” He paused for a moment, and then continued :

“As the Queen hath said, trouble and dissension have reigned in the borders too long—over long to be easily checked at a spoken word. As for the quarrel in which men have fallen, it was none of our seeking, but rather, we have reason to believe brought about by certain malcontents, exiles from our court, who, travelling far and wide (here he looked straight at Fergus) endeavoured to stir up strife throughout the land of Erin. At last they came to the court of an ambitious woman, greedy for gain, who, fired thereto by the tales they told to her of the great plunder to be got by the spoiling of Ulster, hosted a mighty force to carry fire and the sword into this Province.

“All things were against us, for the Curse of Macha

lay heavy on our manhood, turning our strength to weakness and our might to water. Yet one faithful soul untouched by mortal ills, stood to 'fend the 'fenceless land. At the fords Cuchulain harried ye, and at the Pass he beat ye back. Changed then was thy plan, and thou didst march South and East to force another way; but there the host of Ulster waited, and against it thy might was as naught; as the rising waves pass over the sand bar at high tide, so we passed over ye until Queen Maeve herself lay prisoned in our grasp, but was kindly entreated and set at liberty by our greatest champion—him who she had first endeavoured to seduce from his loyalty, and whose death she afterwards tried to encompass, sending one champion after another against him in single combat by the ford.

"These things being so, it seems that Connacht lies within the palm of our hand to do with as we will, and yet in our clemency the terms of peace we dictate—not offer—are not so hard as they well might have been.

"First, as the Brown Bull of Quelgny was made the excuse for the attack, that offer which was made to Dara in secret shall be fulfilled, and to him shall be given as much land in Connacht as he now holds in Ulster, together with a score of cumals*.

"Second. To the widow or orphan of every man who hath fallen shall be paid twelve cumals.

"Third. The royal herds of Connacht shall be handed to us as a war fine.

"Fourth. The exiles from Ultonia who have raised sword against their own land shall be handed over, that each one of them may die a death of infamy.

"Fifth. The six Mainés shall dwell at our court as hostages for the duration of the peace.

"Sixth. The peace shall last for seven years."

As clause after clause was added to the tale of the terms, a murmur of disapproval arose, nor was it confined to the people of Ailell and Maeve, for many there

* A cumal was the Celtic unit of value equal to the price of a woman slave.—Author.

were of Conor's own people who thought the conditions over hard and the demand for the death of the Ulster exiles unjust. Before any man could voice his feelings, Maev was upon her feet and speaking in a white heat of rage.

"These so-called terms, King Conor," she said bitterly, "are such as might be imposed upon a vanquished people with their necks beneath the iron heel of a conqueror, and not such as are offered to a free people strong for war, and yet peace is our desire; listen, therefore, to the terms we will accept:

"Thy first and second conditions we agree to, and of our royal herd we will pay to thee one-half; thy fourth condition we absolutely refuse, for never shall it be said that Maev gave up to a merciless, bloodthirsty tyrant those who sought her aid and fought valiantly in her quarrel. Thine own hand and bloody deeds of shame drove the champions from thy court, King Conor, and into thy hands will I never deliver them; better were it that all should die fighting, than such shame be put upon us and them. Nor will we trust the Princes, our sons, into thy hands as hostages, knowing how thou didst treat the sons of Usna after thy royal word had been pledged that they might return to thy land in peace and dwell in safety.

"For thy sixth condition yes! We are willing for seven years of peace, and to it we pledge our word which has never yet been broken, but we give no hostages. These are our terms for thee to take or leave as pleaseth thee best. I have no more to say!"

"Ye have heard our terms," said Conor sullenly, "and I care not greatly for gear or hostages, but the traitors who fought against me I will certainly have!"

"So! It is to be war," said Maev, rising up.

"Aye, war! red war! North, South, East and West if thou wilt have it, woman!" shouted Conor, "but see thou dost not fall into my hands, or the fate of Deirdre and the Sons of Usna shall be nothing to thy fate and the fate of those thou holdest dear."

And now the Queen turned to depart, but before ever

she had gone a dozen paces, Cuchulain was on his feet, and as he began to speak she turned to listen to him.

"My lord the King speaks over freely and takes strange liberty with the minds and wishes of the free lords of Ulster, methinks," said he, "and it seems, if I read faces aright, that those who fought for the land in the hour of need are not over pleased with the terms my lord the King dictates; nor have I, for one, been consulted in the drawing up of these terms, although I was summoned from dūn Dalk for that purpose.

"Queen Maev speaks truth when she says that thou didst drive Fergus, Ferdia, and thine own son—Cormac—from Emania by the foulness of thy deeds, and I for one will fight in no war of revenge on those who set their own honour above the favour of a King."

At this saying a murmur of approval went up from all the warriors except Owen Mac Darucht and a few kindred spirits, but King Conor sprang to his feet, and shaking his fist in the air he thundered, "Boy! dost thou dare to set thyself against me? Dare to speak so but once again and I will have thee scourged to death."

"I dare to speak as I choose, King Conor," said Cuchulain boldly, and then added, his passions fully roused, "moreover I too know the story of the slaying of the Sons of Usna and the rape of Deirdre, and in that matter I hold thee forsworn and an oath breaker, and if thou dost persist in claiming the lives of Fergus and his fellow exiles, I name thee nidding as well."

Then in his fury Conor lunged out his sword and made to rush at Cuchulain across the hall. But the effort and the excitement were too much for him; the brain-ball burst out through the hole by which it had entered into his head, and he straightway fell down dead upon the floor.

There was a horrified hush in the hall, and for a moment no man moved; but at last Cathbad the Druid raised his hand and said in an awed voice, "The King is dead"; then he turned and whispered awhile to Cuchulain and Conall, after which the latter spoke:

“ Queen Maev! it is our wish that for to-day the conference should end. To-morrow at noon we will meet again and settle the terms of peace; meanwhile thou shalt rest here in Emania as honoured guests.”

Thereafter all that company passed out of the hall, and as each warrior—friend and foe alike—passed that still form he drew his sword and saluted the King, who had passed to a greater Kingdom to give account of his works to the Greatest King of all.

Late that night the chieftains, champions and priests of Ulster sat discussing who should be king in Conor's place, for his line was now extinct save for the little son of Deirdre, who some said was not the son of the King at all, but of Naisi Mac Usna. At last they said that Cuchulain and none other should wear the crown and sit in the King's high place, and word of this was brought by Conall to Cuchulain, for he would not join their council, holding himself in a measure responsible for the King's death. When Conall brought him word of the decision the Council had come to, he said nothing, but in his heart he had another plan, for he had no desire for kingship.

So, with his plan fresh in his mind, he rose up early on the morrow and went to the women's quarters of the King's dūn, and bade the women of the household clothe Dalan, the little son of Deirdre, in his richest robes, but to mention the matter to none of the men folk. And then he went away to find Laeg; him he bade take Dalan and keep him in the little room behind the high seat in the great hall; next he gave him very careful instructions, for in that which he purposed, Cuchulain relied very largely on dramatic effect which should appeal strongly to the warm Celtic temperament.

By noon the whole conference was assembled, with Ailell and Maev in their chairs facing the empty throne. In silence they waited, for none knew who should open the terms of peace. Suddenly Cathbad, the venerable and ancient druid, appeared standing at the foot of the empty high seat.

“ By your leave, royal guests,” said he, “ before we can

arrange the terms of peace we must choose from among us one who shall fill the empty place of him who hath gone beyond, and who shall lead us in the council and the battle." He paused; then turning to the champions he called in a loud voice, "Say, men of Ulster, who name ye to hold the High Kingship?"

With one voice the answer thundered back, "We name Cuchulain, the Glory of the North to be our King!" And from without came cheer upon cheer from the waiting men at arms.

Cathbad looked across the space which separated him from Cuchulain, and said:

"Cuchulain, thou hast deserved well of the land which hath been saved by thy might and cunning, and thy peers have chosen thee for their overlord; take then the crown and wear it, and with it hold the rights of the high justice, the middle and the low!"

Thereat Cuchulain leaped upon the steps of the throne and stood there with the sun falling full upon him, and flashing back from the polished rim of the great buckler upon his left arm.

"That which ye offer, comrades—and I thank thee for the honour—is yet scarcely thine to give. Kings are of the god-folk born to power, and while such an one yet lives and is of the true line, no lesser man may grasp his heritage, and I have yet to learn that Dalan son of King Conor and the Lady Deirdre, is dead. His it is to wear the crown, and mine to guard the land; but if ye say the lad is yet too young, then I say let Fergus Mac Roy hold the throne in trust for him, for forget not that he once ruled in Ulster, and but gave up the throne to Conor that he might wed with Conor's mother, Nessa, who was first wife to his own half brother Fachtra, the great king, to whom she bore Conor. With Fergus's great wisdom to rule the land, and my lucky sword to hold the passes until the lad be a king full grown, the years ahead shall be full of prosperity and peace." Stepping back a pace and putting out his hand behind him, he drew the little lad Dalan forward from the place where Laeg had kept him concealed in the shadow, and,

swinging him high aloft seated on his broad buckler, he shouted:

"Ho! comrades, see the rightful heir to the throne; bend the knee in homage, ye warriors!"

So sudden and dramatically unexpected was the act, that those grim, war-scarred warriors were swept away on a tide of emotion; they bent the knee as Cuchulain ordered, and then rising up flashed out their swords as they gave to the child the royal salute.

Cathbad came swiftly up the steps and set the sceptre in the tiny right hand and placed the crown beside Dalan on the shield. Then Cuchulain strode down the hall and out into the open, holding the child high aloft on the buckler, out into the great courtyard where the sun kissed the golden baby curls and lit up the laughing baby mouth, and as he came he cried to the waiting soldiery:

"Shout, men, for the Ulster King, and up with the Ulster swords," and as he cried aloud a thousand swords leaped clear of their scabbards and a thousand deep voices acclaimed, "Long life to King Dalan! Long life to Cuchulain the King's Hound!"

As they shouted, Fergus was seen standing in the doorway, with a mist of gladness in his old eyes that he was back in Ulster as an Ultonian.

When they saw him, all the soldiers who loved him and had served under him, followed Cuchulain as he led the cheer:

"Long life to Fergus Mac Roy, the King who serves the King!"

Then Cuchulain lifted the little lad down from the shield and kissed him. For a moment Cathbad set the royal crown upon his brow and blessed him, before the waiting nurse led him away to his play.

In this way was the matter settled, and back in the hall the peace conference was opened anew, but that matter was soon settled too, for it was agreed that the terms should stand as Maev had wished yesterday.

Thereafter there followed the appointed days of mourning for King Conor Mac Nessa, and after them,

the days of feasting and rejoicing on the accession of the baby king, Dalan.

When all the feasting and rejoicing were over, King Ailell and Queen Maev returned to Rathcrogan with their following, the exiles to their homes within the Province of Ulster, and Cuchulain went home to his dūn in Murthemney. Fergus Mac Roy took up the reins of government at Emain Macha; one of the first things he did was to re-establish the Boy Corps, or perhaps one should say he formed a new Corps, for of the previous one, which was commanded by Prince Follaman, not a single lad survived the Battle of the Pass, when they went so bravely to the aid of their old comrade Cuchulain, and sacrificed themselves glādlly in the defence of the land at the time the Ultonian Debility lay heavy on the men warriors.

CHAPTER XVII

FIFTEEN years have passed since the death of Conor Mac Nessa and the crowning of the baby king, Dalan.

They have been years of peace and plenty for Ulster and great happiness for Cuchulain, although fraught with partings and some sorrows, as all years must be in the immortal scheme of things while the eternal cycle of Time rolls on and our mortality yet imprisons our spirits.

Dectera has passed into the Great Beyond, happy to the last in the happiness of her son and his wife. Black Sainglend and the Grey of Macha no longer draw the great war car day by day; they lived in honoured peace in the quietude of the home paddocks, and only don their harness on great occasions or for State ceremonies.

Cathbad the Druid, too, is dead, but Fergus, very ancient now, still rules the land wisely and well, maintaining peace with all the neighbouring provinces.

Year by year the young King has grown to beauteous manhood, learning statecraft at the hands of Fergus, and skill in war from Cuchulain and Conall of the Victories; but as yet he has had no actual experience of conflict or blows struck in anger, for of late years peace had reigned on every hand. True, in the second year after Fergus assumed the government of Ulster as Viceroy, Owen Mac Duracht and his cronies rose in rebellion, and with the aid of Lewey and the men of Munster tried to wrest the throne of Ulster from its guardians, but so great and awful was the carnage wrought by Cuchulain and Conall of the Victories, that no further attempts were made. Three years after this news came that the twelve sons of Nechtan were plotting sedition with Owen at their dún by Brugh na Boyna, and against them it

was Fergus's purpose to send a thousand men under Conall. Cuchulain heard of his intention, and, disguising himself and Laeg his charioteer, he drove swiftly to the White Cairn on the Mountains of Mourne, whence he looked northward over the land he guarded and southward to Teltin, where he had done his first great feat at the Lugnasad. Then he bade Laeg point out to him dūn Nechtan, and thither he drove without delay.

Arrived at his destination, he found a fortress great and grim confronting him, and before it a huge pillar stone with a geise carved on it that no man should pass it by until he had conquered one of the sons of Nechtan.

About this pillar he set his arms, and after straining for many minutes he overset it with a mighty heave. The crash of its falling brought Foill Mac Nechtan running from the dūn. Cuchulain did not wait to engage him in sword play, but, fitting a stone to his sling, he cast it with such force that it passed right through Foill's skull, stretching him dead on the grass. Thereafter the hero fought and slew the other eleven brothers one by one, and last of all he slew Owen Mac Duracht, who had been his enemy for so long. Then he bade Laeg cut off the heads of the fallen, and bind six to each of the chariot wheels, but the head of Owen he cut off himself, and set it upon the point of the pole between the horses.

This work finished, he went within the dūn and fired it so that the glare in the sky of the conflagration brought the retainers of Nechtan hurrying home to view Cuchulain's handiwork. Of Cuchulain they found no other sign, for he was far away, driving fast to meet the Ulster soldiers under Conall, and it is told that as he drove, sixteen white swans flew in a wedge above his head, while two great stags raced on either side of his chariot, so that his own people were terrified when he met them, thinking that a visitant from the People of Dana travelled upon the earth.

As King's Champion, to which office he had been appointed after Fergus assumed the Viceroyalty, Cuchulain was often at Emain Macha, but best of all he loved to dwell at his home in Murthemney with Emer

ever by his side, and all that remained of the old retainers he had brought with him from overseas, and who had backed him so nobly in the famous Battle of the Pass, around him. There too he would pass long happy months with his horses and hounds, hunting the deer, the wild boar, and the wolves, or superintending the cultivation of his lands.

One great shadow there was, however, upon the lives of those two perfect lovers, for, as Emer had prophesied, no children were born to them; of this matter they rarely spoke for all hope seemed to have vanished with the passing years.

An evening came upon a day, however, when as they sat gazing out over their fruitful fields, Emer said to her husband:

"It is a sad thing, Cuchulain, to be a woman, hale and hearty, with mother-love yearning in the heart and yet never to have a child to lay at the breast, to fondle, love and plan for, and never a son to carry on thy great name when we have passed hence, nor baby hands to wave farewell when thou dost drive forth to war, or little arms to clasp about thy neck when thou returnest victorious as ever."

"It is sad indeed," answered Cuchulain, "and the fault is mine, for mine was the sinning, and yet the punishment falls heavy on us both."

Silence fell between them for awhile as each thought their own thoughts, but each thought of the same matter, for both of them thought of Connla, the son who had been born to Cuchulain by Aifa, and of whom he had heard no word since that day on which he left the Land of Shadows and the dūn of Skatha.

"Connla must be a youth well grown by this time," said Emer at last, putting the thoughts of both of them into words.

"Yes," said Cuchulain.

"He will surely come to Ireland soon," Emer continued, "and then I shall love him as my own son, although he is not flesh of my flesh, nor came he into the world through pangs of mine."

"Of a truth thou art sweetness 'self, Emer!" exclaimed Cuchulain gratefully; "by reason of my ill-doing thou hast been robbed of the crown and glory of womanhood, yet art thou ready to welcome the fruits of my sinning as thine own flesh and blood, and to cherish him with love and mother-comfort."

"Ah husband!" she answered, "dost thou know so little of a woman's love that thou hast yet to learn that thy sins and sorrows are mine, equally with thy joys and glory. It was not to be with thee in thy happiness alone that I swore the vows and drank the bride-cup, but to share thy troubles and trials, and to bring thee ease and comfort in pain and unhappiness. Every woman is fashioned, Cuchulain, to mother and protect some man. It is only where a maid gives her hand where her heart may not go too, that sorrow is bred of wedlock. Is not this youth Connla flesh and blood of thy body, and are we, too, not one? Surely then he is of me too, for I am of thee, therefore shall he be to me as mine own son."

"Well," said Cuchulain, "I trust he may repay thee love for love as I shall ever do. This, too, I say: that if all men were blessed with such true mates as thou dost prove to me, why then this world were a better place in which to dwell."

Not long after they had finished speaking, a messenger arrived from Emain Macha, bidding Cuchulain to a feast which should be held on the morrow at the Strand of the Footprints, in honour of the young King's birthday. Cuchulain excused himself from going, for in spite of Emer's brave words, he saw that her spirit was downcast and her heart somewhat sad. He did not give the matter another thought after the messenger had departed, yet had he known it, it was fore-ordained that he should attend the feast, and already the Fates were pregnant with trouble, the end of which no man might foretell.

The dawn broke bright on the King's birthday, merrily went the feast and the games at the Strand of the Footprints. Presently as they rested from the play, one of the champions looked out to sea; there, travelling up the path of the sun, he perceived a little coracle, its

wickerwork sides overlaid with plates of bronze hammered thin; as it came, the oars flashed golden in the sunlight; the oarsman ceased to row, and, standing up in the midst of his tiny craft, he commenced slinging stones at the seagulls with unerring aim. Presently a school of porpoises rose not far from him, and these he slew, one by one, with his light casting javelins.

Now it must be told that of all things, King Dalan was most proud of his skill at arms, and when he saw the oarsman, whom he judged to be a boy little older than himself, performing feats which he knew he could not accomplish, a jealous rage ate into his heart, wherefore he sent his body servant Condery down to the water's edge to bid the stranger depart whence he came, as it was the King's desire that he should set no foot on Irish soil.

"Tell the King that I go back for no man, for I come to Ireland under geise and upon a quest ordained at my birth," said the youth. With that he sprang upon the shore and strode boldly up the strand.

To have his authority thus set at naught, enraged Dalan beyond bearing.

"Conall," he called, "drive me this stripling from our shores."

Conall went forward to do the King's bidding, but so mighty a warrior as he had no wish to cut down one whom he considered an immature youth.

"Go back to thy boat and depart ere a worse thing befall thee," he said, laying a hand upon his sword. Before he could draw the weapon, the lad leaped on him and bore him to the ground with a strength amazing in one so slight and young; nor was this all, for no sooner was the great champion upon the ground, than he found himself tightly bound with the straps of his own shield.

Champion after champion the King sent against the young invader; some he disabled, others he bound, but he slew no man.

At last Fergus called out to the King to have done and to welcome the lad as an honoured guest.

"Not so," replied Dalan, "I will now send for Cuchu-

lain, for if the nation to which this stranger belongs send men of his breed to this shore, the land will be ours no longer." To this Fergus had nothing to say, so the King turned to Condery.

"Ride," said he, "to dūn Dalk, and bid the Lord Cuchulain come hither instantly, bringing with him his weapons of war"; and after a pause he added, "Say to him, 'Here a stranger waits who has overthrown and bound the Lord Conall and all the most valiant champions of the land, and that the honour of Ulster is in danger at his hands!'"

Condery bowed, sprang upon a horse, and within an hour he had delivered his message at Cuchulain's dūn, and as he told the tale Emer stood by her husband's side and listened.

"Ah! go not to this fray," she cried, "for my heart foretells ill of it."

"Never yet have I flinched from fight," answered Cuchulain, "and though I knew death awaited me on the Strand of the Footprints yet would I go."

"It is not death for thee that my heart forebodes," said Emer, "but death to one who is dearer to thee than life."

"Thou speakest strangely, Emer. What is in thy mind? Make all the matter clear, I beseech thee. Surely thou canst not fear thine own death in my brief absence?"

"Nay, my husband, death cometh not to thee or me yet awhile, but think a moment on our talk last night, and say who but Cuchulain, or one of Cuchulain's blood, could overthrow all the mightiest champions of Ulster?"

"Speak no more in riddles, Emer. Dost thou mean that this stranger is Connla, my son?"

"That indeed is my thought. Think now, Cuchulain, of the geise thou didst put upon the lad at his birth. He should come to Ireland when his finger fitted thy ring, in other words when he was old enough to bear the arms of manhood. And lo! a stranger lad comes to the shores of Ulster in a mystic boat, performing wonderful feats before ever his keel grinds on the beach. Thou didst say he should never refuse combat, and this boy has fought

our doughtiest champions one by one, nor should he ever reveal his name and lineage to man or woman until he had slain his first foe. Well this lad refuses his name to the King, and although he hath overthrown all the champions, yet no man hath he slain. Think, too, of that night when thou didst lie in Aifa's bed and Lugh the Protector, Lugh thy heavenly father, stood beside thee speaking in thy dreams; did he not say, 'One son alone shalt thou have—a glorious boy—but he shall pass from thee on the wave of thy battle fury.' And lo! a glorious boy is come, and thou art summoned to do battle with him. Say, lord, do not all things work to an appointed end? Yet, husband, if thou wilt but hear my word, the doom may still be averted. Go to the Strand of the Footprints an' thou wilt, but speak this youth fair. Ask nothing of whence he comes or who he is, but persuade him to serve in the army of Ulster. Thus may he slay his man and break the geise and all end happily."

"Yes, I will go!" said Cuchulain, "and if may be, will do as thou sayest, for almost do I believe thou art fey and speak true words. Yet I am summoned by the King—whose champion I am—to fight for the honour of Ulster, so if he wills that I should fight, fight I must; but this I tell thee, though I knew this lad for certain to be Connla's self, yet would I slay him at the King's command, and for the honour of the Province."

And now Emer sank down on the floor of the hall as she watched her lord pass out through the doors and heard the rumble of his chariot wheels as he drove away to the Strand of the Footprints.

The little hour which lured Cuchulain to the greatest tragedy of his troubled life drew all too quickly to its close, as the galloping hoofs ate up the road, until he stood between Dalan and Fergus gazing down the beach to where the stranger youth stood alone, tossing on high a great sword which he caught unerringly by the hilt as it fell:

Long time Cuchulain gazed, and then turning to the King he spoke:

"In yonder youth, lord, I see the greatest champion of all time, beside whose might, when he is become a man full grown, my own deeds and those of even Fergus and Conall shall appear as naught. Were it not, therefore, well to greet him honourably and make him welcome to the land that we may have profit of his friendship, and, belike, of his service in our hour of need?"

"No!" replied Dalan; "he hath put shame upon us by the overthrow of our mightiest men; see even now where they lie bound and vanquished. Moreover he has flouted me, for he will in nowise divulge who he is or whence he journeys. All he will say is that he visits Ireland under geise upon a quest ordained at his birth. No! we will shew him no hospitality, and he shall certainly die."

Cuchulain started and grew sad when he heard that the strange youth had come to Ireland under geise and on a fore-ordained errand, for it seemed to confirm the suspicions of the stranger's identity which Emer's words had awakened in his mind. Now Fergus was watching his old comrade and pupil keenly throughout this conversation, and seeing Cuchulain's countenance drop, he readily divined that there was some reason for the hero's advice that the stranger youth should be welcomed to Ultonia, wherefore he hastened to add his word to that of the King's champion.

"Lord!" said Fergus to Dalan, "were it meet for me so to do, I would remind thee of the loyal service Cuchulain hath ever rendered to thy house and to the land of Ulster; moreover we have ever counselled thee for the best, so that these long years past in Ulster there hath been peace and security, and now I add my word to his and say to thee, welcome the stranger well, and good shall come of it."

But Dalan was jealously perverse.

"Very well," said he, "if the honour of Ulster is less to thee both than the safety of every wandering rogue who comes to our shores, let the fellow be taken with honour to Emania or whereso else thou wilt. All I ask is that ye keep him out of my way, for he hath brought

great scorn upon the House of the Red Branch this day. Also, one other thing I stipulate, that he shall first tell his name and lineage, whence he comes, and what is the wondrous quest of which he speaks, for I welcome no nameless man. If he will not tell it, why then Cuchulain shall fight with him, and if Cuchulain will not, then, by Dana, I will! Yes, though he slay me!" Thus saying, he strode angrily away, leaving Cuchulain and Fergus alone together.

"Why so set to save this youth, Cuchulain?" queried the old warrior.

"Ah, Fergus!" answered he, "I greatly fear that this lad is my own son Connla whom Aifa hath sent from the Land of Shadows to search for me as I did bid her, and if so he will not reveal his name, and I must slay him or he me."

"Nay! if this be so, have naught to do with the matter, for 'twere better to let a King sulk for awhile than to slay thine only son."

"Not so! for were he thrice my son, yet would I still slay him for the honour of Ulster, and at the command of that King whom I set upon the throne. No more words, old friend, for I must needs speak with this wanderer, while thou, by his leave, shall set the Champions free."

Cuchulain passed down the Strand to where the youth stood and rested by the water's edge.

"Greeting!" said Cuchulain, "and welcome to Ulster!"

"Greeting!" answered the youth, "and thanks be to thee for those the first pleasant words that have come to my ears since I set foot upon these shores. Indeed," he added with a whimsical smile very like Cuchulain's own, "the people of this land seem more lavish of blows than of speech."

"Ah well!" returned Cuchulain, "strong blows are the tokens of a brave man's heart. But tell me, who art thou, whence dost thou come, and for what purpose? Nay," he added, as he saw refusal writ large upon the boy's countenance, "I ask not from idle curiosity, but

because I would tell these matters to the King that he may make thee welcome, and if it be thy will, find for thee a place in his army."

"There is nothing in the world I desire more than to be welcome in Ultonia," answered the youth, "for here it is that I must follow my quest. Yet I cannot tell thee that which thou dost ask, for to do so were to break the geise set upon me at my birth, and this I will not do."

"Think well before thy final word is given," said the older man; "on it may hang thy life, for the King hath decreed that unless these matters are made plain, I, the King's champion, must fight with thee."

"I grieve! but my answer is already given, and I go not back on it nor break a geise."

"So be it!" said Cuchulain, and as he drew his sword he sighed.

For a moment they stood on guard, and then fell to, and to this day the story is handed down by the descendants of the champions who stood around and watched, that never was such sword play seen in Ireland before or since, nor ever will be seen again, than when, for the first and last time in his life, Cuchulain found sword-craft outmatched by a more skilful fighter than himself.

At last the boy delicately shore off a long lock of his opponent's hair, whereat Cuchulain cast away his sword, thinking to yield himself and thus save this glorious youth alive, but his purpose was mistaken, and in an instant he found himself encircled in a grip of steel. Hither and thither they wrenched and strained and struggled, their feet sinking deep into the sand and churning it up, but neither could out-wrestle the other; then as they paused and gasped in great sobbing breaths, men shouted until the air shook, for the struggle was Titanic.

No long pause did they make for rest, but fell to again with a will, and ever as they wrestled they drew nearer to the water's edge. At last they are in it, and the waves lap about their middles as each strives his utmost for the mastery.

Cuchulain's foot slips on a rock, and with a mighty splash they disappear beneath the waves, and the waters boil and bubble over and around them. Now and then their heads burst together above the surface as they gasp and sob for air, only to disappear again in an instant, their limbs still locked in that dire embrace and struggling fiercely.

Hours seem to pass, although in reality it can only have been a matter of moments; then the waters reddened, the turmoil died down, and the body of the wanderer rose to the surface, and began to drift out to sea. A little nearer to shore rose the head of Cuchulain, with staring glassy eyes, but yet with consciousness enough remaining, to look around until he saw the floating body, and then, swimming with feeble strokes, he brought the dying lad to shore. Straight up the bank he staggered with his burden, and laid it down at the feet of the King, saying: "Lord, accept Cuchulain's greatest gift to Ulster, the life of his only son"; for now he knew him for certain by the ring upon his finger; and the youth said "It is true! I am Connla, and thou art my father Cuchulain whom I came overseas to seek, but woe is me, for in finding thee I am hurt to death, for Skatha never taught me the use of the Gae Bolg or how to guard against it."

Now what happened beneath the surface of the waves none may say; whether it was that Connla fell upon the Belly Spear in his father's belt, or whether in the mists of dissolution—for he was very near to drowning—Cuchulain's battle fury came upon him, and he drove the weapon against his only son, will never be known, but certain it is that it was the Gae Bolg which ripped open the stomach of Connla, as certain as that the weapon has been lost from that day to this, and never been seen or used by mortal man again.

For a while Connla lay quiet while his life blood welled out and was sucked up by the hungry sands. Presently he spoke again, and his voice was woeful weak:

"Grieve not for me, my father! thou didst not know. Grieve rather for Ulster, for it was foretold to me by a wise man that could I but live to grow to my prime

at thy side, the King of Ulster should conquer and rule, not only Ireland, but the world as far as the Pillars of Hercules, aye and beyond, even to the seven hills of Rome; but now the chance is gone, my life is done, and thy end draws near, and with our race the Glory of Ulster shall wane and fade until the House of the Red Branch crashes to ruins."

Again he was silent for a long time, but at last he spoke, and now his voice was little more than a whisper.

"My father—I am dying fast—scarcely do mine eyes—behold thee more—but—bring hither—I—pray thee—the famous champions—that—I may—know and await—them beyond—and give them—greeting!"

Then as he lay in his father's arms, all the great men of Ulster who were there, came and knelt by him to bid him farewell. First came the King, who knelt and wept and begged his forgiveness, confessing freely his jealousy, but the youth whom he had wronged only smiled tiredly, with that look of pitying knowledge in his eyes which death brings to young and old alike at the last, as they gaze beyond the eternal portals and commune with the spirits of those who wait to welcome them to their rest, while they themselves are yet on earth. Last of all came Fergus and Conall together, but when they had said their farewells, and they too would have passed on, he motioned with his eyes that they should bide with his father to speed the parting soul.

For a while longer he lay thus, gazing calmly out over the sea, then, with a tired fluttering sigh he closed his eyes, and turning in Cuchulain's arms he sank into that sleep from which there is no awakening until the last great trumpet shall sound, the graves yawn, and the sea give up her dead.

There was no sound of lamentation and no weeping; silently they wrapped him in a cloak and laid him on a bed of spears, and as silently the grim chieftains bore him away up into the Mountains of Mourne, where he might forever lay and look out over the sea across which he had sailed to find his father and his death.

There they left him in the great cairn they built, with

a beautifully fashioned pillar-stone at the head of his grave.

From that time madness seized upon Cuchulain, or perhaps one should rather say a gentle strangeness, which lead him to wander about the country, succouring the sick and needy and protecting the defenceless and those who were persecuted. In this way was fulfilled the prophecy made at his birth by the druid Morann that he should "win the love of many and right the wrongs of the people."

Many strange experiences befell him as he journeyed up and down the land, and ever as he wandered, the faithful Laeg went with him to attend to his wants and to guard him from evil, which well might come upon him in his absent-minded forgetfulness. Emer too would have wished to be with him, but this he would in no wise permit.

The fame of Cuchulain's goodness to those in trouble, spread far and wide throughout the length and breadth of Ireland, until it came to the ears of Blánid, the unhappy young Queen of the old King Curoi of Munster, who was much persecuted by her husband, but more so by her stepson, Lewey, who was many years older than she was, and who above all things desired her death, in order that he alone might enjoy the riches and power of his father, when the old King should die; indeed he plotted continually to encompass her end, but his intentions were known to Blánid. When news came to her of the might and gentleness of Cuchulain, she took counsel with her trustworthy maid, and telling her where she might obtain a horse, she provided her with money and bade her slip away from the King's dūn and make her way to Cuchulain to see if he would come to the aid of her mistress the queen.

Now since Cuchulain had grown fairy-kist, he loved to lie o' nights by the dwellings of the little folk, so that four nights after the maid had set out from the dūn of Curoi, he might have been seen sleeping in the moonlight by the Fairy Mound of Angus on the banks of the Boyne, and as he slept there echoed continually

through his dreams the hungry baying of great hounds. At last he awoke to find Laeg already sitting up, the baying of the hounds was real and very near, but nothing could be seen as yet, for the moon was veiled by a great cloud bank. Soon, however, the clouds shredded out and the moon broke through, and then there burst upon their sight a terrible vision which brought them to their feet with an angry cry of horror. Across the plain, upon a great horse, there raced a wide-eyed, terror-stricken woman, with clothes dishevelled and hair streaming out behind her, while in her tracks came six fierce bloodhounds, and behind them galloped a great bloated fellow, who whooped on his hounds and struck spurs into his horse's reeking flanks as the moon revealed his quarry.

For one instant only Cuchulain and Laeg stood at gaze, and then they were racing for the ford, towards which the woman was making, as fast as their feet could carry them, and in their hands flashed naked weapons.

Would they be in time? It seemed impossible; yet not for nothing had Cuchulain in his youth been known as the fleetest-footed man in all Ireland, and to-night his youthful speed seemed to come back to him. Easily he out-distanced Laeg, and alone plunged into the water, just as the two leading hounds flung themselves forward and fastened their teeth in the horse's flanks on the far bank of the river. The wretched animal screamed in its agony, but not yet might the fierce brutes pull it down. Now Cuchulain was half way across the river, and still the horse struggled gamely on, only to fall at his feet as he cleared the edge of the bank. As it fell, he caught the woman from the saddle and set her behind him as he turned to face the hounds.

Luckily for Cuchulain he carried a javelin as well as his sword that night. As the first great hound leaped straight at his throat, he dropped to his knee and allowed the brute to impale itself fairly on the spear point, but such was the animal's weight that the shaft was snapped clean in half, and there the dog lay, writhing and biting at the spear head embedded in its body. And now

Cuchulain had only just time to whip out his sword before two fresh hounds were upon him. Luckily the other three remained to worry the horse; Cuchulain cut at the first hound as it leaped, and his downward sweeping blow severed the spinal column; but the other, a great dog-hound, fixed his fangs firmly in his clothing in such a way that he could not strike at it without grave risk of dealing himself a serious hurt. He threw his sword to the woman to defend herself as best she might; she was a brave girl, and, leaping forward she hacked savagely at the hound until it released its hold and sank down bleeding from a dozen dreadful wounds.

By this time Laeg had arrived, but so too had the horseman, who proved to be none other than Cuchulain's old enemy, Lewey; but he did not recognise the deliverers who had appeared from the river, for he was too intent upon whipping his hounds off the horse, so that he might set them on the human quarry and make an end of her.

In the excitement the girl retained Cuchulain's sword gripped tightly in her hand, so that when the three great hounds, urged on by Lewey, leapt forward, Cuchulain was defenceless, save for his naked hands. One hound Laeg slew with his casting spear, and the next held at bay with his short sword, seeking for an opportunity to get in a mortal blow, but the third, a great tawny brute with black points, leaped straight at Cuchulain's throat and bore him to the ground; nor could any help come to him, for man and beast rolled over and over in a deadly struggle, and to strike at the animal might well have ended the career of the man; but at last he gets the hound pinned with its back against a rock, while he presses his knee hard into its stomach; his head is thrown back, his face almost black with congested blood as he puts forth all his might. There comes an indescribably horrible rending, sucking sound, and then a ghastly howl of unutterable agony—he has *torn the great brute's jaws asunder*, slaying it with his naked hands. So awful was the sight and so horrible the sounds that Laeg turned pale, the woman fell in a swoon, and Lewey pulled his horse about, and galloped away in a sweat of fear.

Cuchulain seemed absolutely unaffected; drawing a deep breath, he moved away down the river to bathe his torn and bleeding hands, motioning to Laeg as he went to attend to the woman who had fainted.

When he came back, the woman was sitting up and ready—nay anxious—to tell her tale, for already she had learned from Laeg that his master was that Cuchulain of whom her mistress Blánid the Queen had sent her in search. But no word would Cuchulain hear until they had got over the Boyne and back to their little camp by the Angus Mound, where she was made to rest and given food and milk, which Laeg heated over the embers of their yesternight's fire. Before ever the poor girl had finished the meal, her head began to nod, and soon she slept the sleep of exhaustion, both mental and physical, with her back against a tree trunk.

Gently the two men lifted her up, and wrapping her in a cloak laid her in their own little shelter and built up the fire, for the night was cold; then they sat talking, as they awaited the dawn, for neither of them had any further wish for sleep that night, and if the truth must be told, they were both anxious to know why this girl sought Cuchulain so eagerly, why Lewey came to lay his bloodhounds on her track, and whether of a set purpose or from sheer wanton devilry?

With the first streaks of dawn shewing in the sky, Laeg set to work to prepare the morning meal; just as it was ready the girl crawled out from the little tent, awakened by the smell of the cooking meat belike, for she was very hungry. Rising to her full height, she stretched her arms abroad, and throwing back her head she yawned, then walked shyly forward to where her rescuers sat upon the turf.

As she came Cuchulain rose courteously to his feet saying:

"Greeting of morn, maiden; thou art surely ready and very welcome to join us in our simple repast."

"Indeed am I ready to eat, lord! I whose lips had tasted no food from yesterdawn until thou didst feed me last night."

As she spoke of last night she shuddered at the recollection of her narrow escape, and turned impulsively to thank her deliverers; but "Ne'er mind that now," said Cuchulain kindly, "thou wilt be the better able to tell thy tale after thou hast eaten." So for the most part they ate their meal in silence, and then, when Laeg had gone to tend the horses, Cuchulain turned to his guest and said:

"Now, if it be thy pleasure, thou shalt tell me thy story, and for what reason thou camest flying across the plain, with Lewey the Liar and his bloodhounds hot upon thy track, in search of Cuchulain."

"Of myself little need be said, but of the Queen Blaid and of my quest much must be told; yet first I would know one thing. Last night it seemed as I recovered from a swoon upon the banks of yonder river, thy companion did tell me that thou art that Cuchulain the Protector, of whom I have been sent in search. Say, lord! did I but dream, or is this true?"

"It is true that I am named Cuchulain, and some call me the Protector."

"Then never was thy help and protection more sorely needed than by the poor woman to whose aid I would bring thee; but perchance thy protection is only for the people of Ulster, and thou art not willing to journey far to succour beauty in distress?"

"Softly, softly! let us first know more of the matter before promises are either given or taken. I would know who is this queen and what her trouble, and also how Lewey, who has ever been my enemy, comes to be mixed in it."

"This then is the story, lord! In the Province of Munster in the far South, lives the great King Curoi, and with him his wife Queen Blaid, and his son by another mother, Prince Lewey. The queen is perhaps the best and gentlest of women who walks the earth, but she has no love for Curoi, to whom she was mis-mated against her will; moreover, she is young, lovely, and full of fire, but he is old and hideous, like a gnarled and ancient tree that totters to its doom; the sap is dry in

him, Lord, and no children will be born of that union. This Curoi knows, also that his wife loves him not, wherefore he ill uses her shamefully, daring even to scourge her lovely body; but physical pain hurts not my dear lady most, but that the King fills the court with wanton women and profligate, debauched soldiers, boon companions of Lewey's. Faugh! I tell thee, lord, it is like a piggery, where decent women may not live, where most of all they insult and openly mock the pure young Queen."

For a moment she paused, looking keenly at Cuchulain, and then continued.

"Still, Curoi must die soon, for he is old and foul, living as a swine, and so the Queen might have borne her shame and sorrows in patience until the appointed hour, but by our laws, the land passes to her on the old King's death. It may well be that she will wed again and raise up children of another house than that of Curoi, and where then is the inheritance of Prince Lewey? For this reason he plans his step-mother's death; three attempts have been made already, once by poison, once by the knife of the hired assassin, and once by the falling of a rock as we rode out to hunt. By the mercy of God, each attempt has failed, but now must be told a tale of shame unthinkable, which has forced the Queen to seek thy aid.

"Finding it impossible to bring about her end while faithful servants ever watch over her, Lewey came to the Queen's apartments a week ago and told her that he thought the old King would very soon pass beyond, and then the land would lie within a woman's rule, but he added that it did not seem good to him that so great a burden should be thrown upon his dear Blaid's shoulders, and therefore he would take her to wife after it should please his father to pass beyond the Light."

"The villain!" exclaimed Cuchulain.

"Well mayst thou say so; for first he would have murdered the Queen, and now he lusts after his own father's wife, and would, I think, encompass that

father's death too to gain his ends, for above all Lewey loves power and riches.

"The Queen ordered him from her chamber in a royal fury, saying that she would lay the matter before the King on the morrow, but Lewey only laughed. 'The King will not believe thy word against mine, and anyway I can afford to wait,' he said.

"When he had gone, the Queen sent for me, and giving me money, she bade me set out as soon as an opportunity should serve, to find thee, and tell thee all the tale and implore thy aid. Five days ago I left the King's dūn, and buying a horse, I set out towards Ulster, nor did any mishap befall me till at noon yesterday I heard the bloodhounds baying upon my track; thereafter followed a nightmare ride, of which I can remember little, except that once I rode up a stream to try and shake the pursuit off, only to find two hours later, that they had the line again. After that I remember only galloping hour after hour—eternally it seemed—until the great hounds leaped upon my poor horse's flank, and at the same moment thou didst spring up over the edge of the river bank to my aid."

She ceased, and for a time Cuchulain sat pondering her words. So long he sat that the girl's impatience overcame her.

"Surely, my lord, thou wilt not leave this poor Queen to her fate?"

"Nay! nay!" said Cuchulain, "I do but think on ways and means to aid her best." Then he added, "Munster will be an unsafe place for thee at present, so thou shalt go with me to Dūn Dalk, and dwell awhile there with Emer my wife."

Once back in Murthemney, Cuchulain rapidly assembled his hundred henchmen. Six of them he disguised as skalds and strolling players and sent on ahead under Luchar to spy out the land and to insinuate themselves into the dūn of Curoi if possible. The rest he formed into a caravan of—apparently—peaceful traders, but in their bundles of chattels they concealed their weapons of war.

A week after the coming of the hound-hunted maiden,

the caravan set out for the south, but as the dūn of Curoi was over a hundred and fifty miles distant, and much of the land which lay between hostile and robber ridden, Cuchulain decided to put out in his two great dragons of war from Dūndalk Bay, so that he might come to Curoi's land as it were from overseas. Before he sailed, he despatched a well-mounted messenger to overtake the party disguised as skalds and players, and to bid Luchar, who had charge of them, to meet his lord secretly upon Wicklow Head on the eighth day.

Now as they sailed out and away over the sea—for it was Cuchulain's purpose to sail far beyond the limit in which he should meet Irish trading ships, who might carry word of his voyaging to Curoi—the hero laughed long and loud, and lo! it was the clear, ringing laugh of a sane man, for Cuchulain was happy to be at sea again, and as he rode the tossing waves, the madness passed from him.

For seven days the two great galleys sailed the seas, but on the eighth day there rose Wicklow Head above the horizon at the dawn; Cuchulain caused a little coracle to be dropped over-side, and taking only Laeg with him, he rowed ashore, and there among the rocks he found Luchar awaiting him.

“Well!” he queried eagerly, “what news?”

“The best of news, lord! We have been well received at Dūn Curoi, where we dwell until it pleases us to pass on elsewhere; every night we sing or perform for the company, and so are welcome, but the best is yet to be told. Prince Lewey hath led off nearly the whole of his father's retainers northwards, for he guessed the message the maid he hunted bore, and now he hath set out to meet and give thee battle on the Central Plain, thinking thou wilt surely pass that way at the head of a great host.”

“Good! And what force holds the dūn?”

“Barely two hundred men!”

“Good, again! But what of Queen Blanid?”

“Ah, my lord, that is a sad tale. There she sits night after night in the midst of the King's ‘Nunnery of Lights o' Love,’ as he is pleased to call them, and their

attendant runagate, drunken knaves, who, by the way, have *not* gone forth to fight in Lewey's train. Yes! there sits the sad-eyed Queen, saying never a word, syne the King will curse her for a spoil-sport and syne draw his dog whip across her cheek to teach her manners to his friends, if she protest against too gross an outrage. Oh! it is a nice household thou hast sent us to Master, and long 'ere this, had my blade drunk the blood of the villain King and his thrice-damned son, but that I knew a greater vengeance waited."

"Fear not, Luchar! vengeance cometh in its own good time; but tell me where art housed in the dūn?"

"In the rooms looking down the river towards the sea."

"To-night, then, thou shalt try to gain the key of the gate, and if this hath been accomplished, shoot an arrow bearing a lighted fire-ball along the river into the water, and at the hour of dawn, steal out and unbar the way to us. Thus will we carry the dūn while all men sleep; but if this may not be, and no arrow is shot to give the sign, we will come boldly up the river to-morrow as peaceful traders and take our chance. In that event, we will leave the second galley outside the mouth of the river, so as not to excite suspicion, and anyway fifty of us with thy help, should be able to force our purpose by surprise once we have effected our entrance into the dūn. Go now, and to-night I shall wait on the river for the flaming sign."

Then as Luchar began to scale the rugged head, Cuchulain re-entered the boat and Laeg pulled him back to the dragon, which instantly sailed out to sea again, pulled by the great oars.

CHAPTER XVIII

IN the dark of a moonless night, two sentries stood by the river gate of the King's Dún.

"How still it is," said one.

"Yes! and hark how the fish are rising."

"That was a big fellow that jumped then."

"Was it? It sounded to me more like the splash of oars. Listen!"

Suddenly a flash of light gleamed above the river and hissed faintly as it disappeared.

"What was that?" asked the man who had bade his comrade listen.

"Nothing but a shooting star, thou fool," said the other crossly"; "how nervous thou art to-night."

Then as the other was about to reply angrily, the sound of footsteps which heralded the approach of the commander of the guard as he went his rounds, set them pacing their solitary beats again.

The night hours passed in undisturbed silence, but just before the dawn lights had flooded up out of the east, a very close observer might have seen twenty dark objects bobbing and floating on the water, and working steadily up stream until they clustered above and below the river gate, where they anchored stationary against the wall.

Presently a lean face looked out through the door, and, seeing nothing, the owner crept out and down the steps; in his hand was a dagger, from which something dropped with little sudden splashes on to the stones.

After a while the lean man seemed to discern the dark objects, for he chuckled to himself, and stooping down until his lips almost touched the water, he emitted

a thin musical sound midway between a whistle and a sung note. Instantly the dark objects within the shadow of the wall, detached themselves and moved until they gathered around the steps; then one by one twenty men slipped swiftly out of the water, up the steps and through the door.

In the darkness of the gateway, their comrades from within the dūn awaited them. Man by man Cuchulain called over the twenty-six names before he led the little band across the open space to the guard house, where the main guard were sleeping. Posting his men where they could best overawe the guard and at the same time hold back those within the dūn from breaking out, at all events for a short space of time, he ran back to the water gate and blew a high loud blast on his war horn. Then as he listened, there came from down the river the splashing of oars as the great galleys were got under way, but from behind him came shouts, cries, and the sound of running feet, followed by the clash of arms.

When the galleys reached the steps, Cuchulain shouted to the soldiers to follow him, and raced back across the yard. As he came, a great man burst from the door of the dūn and hacked his way through the besiegers; as his eyes fell on Cuchulain, he charged straight forward with his sword and shield up. But Cuchulain was old in war, moreover he bore an axe, and louting low beneath the great man's sword, he swept upwards with his own blade, killing his foe.

"Of a truth," shouted Luchar, "well begun is half done, for that is Curoi thou hast slain, and no other."

At this Cuchulain laughed, and holding up his hands called a truce.

"Send hither to me," he cried, "the commander of the garrison"; and when the man came, "Friend! it seems that the dūn is in our power, for Lewey hath marched north I hear, and Curoi is dead at my hands. It were a shameful thing to waste the lives of brave men, yet it is hard I know for thee to surrender, so thou shalt march out of the dūn with thine arms, if thou wilt

pledge thy word to take no part against me nor to serve in Lewey's fighting tail for a year and a day."

"It shall be as thou sayest," answered the commander of the garrison; "but what of those lords who were the King's friends?"

"They shall be disposed of as the Queen wills!"

"Then may Dana have mercy upon them, for they deserve none at her hands."

At these sayings a great outcry arose from the courtiers, but Cuchulain silenced it instantly, saying:

"Go thou, and await me in the great hall! Luchar, take sufficient men and guard them, but first send word to Queen Blanid, asking if she will receive me."

It was a dishevelled and downcast band of men and women who looked up with hang-dog faces as Blanid the Queen, escorted by Cuchulain, came to judge them in that very hall where only yesternight they had made sport of her.

No word was spoken as she passed up the hall to the high seat, and seated herself thereon; but many pairs of eyes watched her anxiously.

Cold and very beautiful was the face of the young Queen, as she sat and looked upon those who for so many months past had been her tormentors. At last she spoke:

"It seems that the hour at which the mistals are cleared hath come, yet for myself I would be merciful and set ye free, although every gross insult and indignity have I suffered at thy hands. Yet if such as ye are left to wander free upon the earth, it may well be that some other poor queen or wife shall suffer at thy hands, even as I have suffered.

"If I might find one worthy man or woman among ye, if I could remember but one good deed performed, that man or woman should go free; but I cannot. Of the men, they have not even the saving grace of bravery in war, for they feared even to march with Prince Lewey to oppose this very Lord Cuchulain who has won his way here to my aid. The women are beyond the pale of my

mercy, for they have put off their womanhood, and are profligate, wanton, through and through. Therefore it is my will that the men should be executed, as they deserve, and the women sold into slavery.

"This house of misery and shame shall be given to the flames when we sail hence; for the land, Lewey may take and rule it as is his desire, while I go hence to seek happiness in seclusion."

This awful decree called forth weeping and curses from the doomed wretches, but neither tears nor entreaties availed to move the young Queen. As she had said, so it was done, and that night the raiders put forth to sea again; behind them, as they cleared the river's mouth, the burning dūn lit up the sky.

A morning of glorious sunlight dawned on Blanid's first day of freedom, and as the galleys sailed up the Irish Coast, she felt her troubles dropping from her like worn-out clothing cast aside. Already she looked ahead to long years of peaceful happiness. As she sat in the forepart of the ship looking out over the dancing waves, Cuchulain joined her.

"How can I ever thank thee enough, my dear lord, for the help and the happiness thou hast given to me," she said, "for naught now remains of the old dreadful life, and not a one of those who plagued me so sorely, is near to remind me of all the sorrows that are lost."

Yet she spoke over hastily, for, 'though they knew it not, Fercartna the Jester, who had loved his master, King Curoi, had stolen aboard the galley, ere it sailed; even then he lay concealed among the bales of merchandise. Now this jester, though said to be half-witted, was very cunning. For two days he lay in hiding watching for his opportunity. On the second day it came. He saw the Queen alone, leaning over the side of the ship. Like a snake he left his hiding place and wormed his way along until he was almost within hands' touch of her. She looked up, and seeing him, she screamed aloud, but as she screamed he leapt upon her. Laeg, who was standing near, rushed forward to her aid, and Cuchulain from the body of the ship,

snatched up a javelin and hurled it, missing Fercartna by a hair's breadth. More he could not do, for he was too far off. Laeg grabbed at the madman, but was handed off. With a scream of demoniacal laughter, the Jester wound his arms around Bland the Queen, and with her, hurled himself into the sea, and was seen no more.

Thus ended the life of a sorely ill-used woman whom Cuchulain had done his best to succour, so that it was in sorrow that the expedition returned to Dūn Dalk.

Meanwhile Lewey and his men waited on the Central Plains for the coming of Cuchulain. When he came not, they returned to their home, only to find it in ruins, the King dead, and their friends dead also or sold into slavery.

But the matter was not to end thus, for Lewey laid a complaint before Erc, King of Ireland, that Cuchulain had slain his father and carried off the Queen in times of peace, and thereafter, with Erc, Ket, and Anluan, he made a great hosting to go up against Ulster, when the Curse of Macha should once more hold the men folk.

Far and wide they sought Cuchulain, and at last found him on the Central Plain, but he was alone and so escaped from them for that time.

As he went he came to Ath Ferdia on the River Dee at dawn, and there in the middle of the water stood an awful hag, with white dishevelled hair all blood besprent, with taloned hands and sharp boned arms, and as she stood mid-leg deep in the ford, she snatched one after another spear-torn scarves and bloody silken vests from a great pile on the bank, and plunged them into the stream, which ran crystal clear to where she stood, and thereafter ran red towards the sea.

Laeg pulled up the chariot, and strove to calm the trembling steeds as Cuchulain called.

"Who art thou, hideous one, and what dost thou here?"

"I am of the Tuath de Danaan, and me men name the Washer at the Ford!" the hag replied; "my

dwelling is on fear-haunted Knockrea, these clothes are thine and this thy head," she continued, as from the pile upon the bank she picked up by the clotted, gory hair a ghastly human head with death distorted features. Then, waving the horrid trophy in her hand, she rose in the air and vanished.

"Death is very near now Laeg," said the hero. "Drive home to Dún Dalk that I may bid farewell to Emer."

Back at the dún, he took his wife in his arms and said:

"Beloved! Lewey is out on my track with a great host, and with him are Erc, Ket, and Anluan. This, I fear, shall be my last farewell, for to-day have I seen and spoken with the Washer at the Ford and she hath shown me mine own head."

Sorely Emer wept, and earnestly she besought him to take ship and sail away to safety.

"Nay, my wife," said he, "this may not be. Once before a great host came when the land lay open; again the Curse of Macha holds the men, and shall it be told by the satirists in days to come, that Cuchulain fled when he alone of all men was fit to lift a sword in Ultonia's defence?"

"Ah, Cuchulain, the path of honour was ever the way thou didst tread; nor at the last shall any stain rest on thy fair fame. Yet I would it had been otherwise; few peaceful years have we known and much sorrow hath been ours. Still, if thou goest hence, well do I know that not long shall I tarry behind thee, therefore lord, await me beyond the Rainbow Bridge, that we two may enter into our rest together."

"Speak not so, Emer! for I pray that many years of peace and happiness lie before thee. Yet, now at the last, I would that a part of the past might be undone, and that I might leave thee with little children grouped about thy knees to make the parting less bitter; but what is done is done, and for our deeds, good and bad alike, we reap the reward. Come now! for Laeg hath harnessed Black Sainglend and the Grey of Macha for the last great foray."

Then they went out into the sunlight, and before he mounted up into his chariot, she kissed him long and lovingly. She would say no more words lest she should make the parting more bitter for him at the last, but bade him come back victorious as ever.

As Cuchulain drove away along the road from his dūn, he came upon three old women, poor and very wretched, sitting by the wayside, cooking a meal over a little fire they had built of sticks.

"Stay and share our meal, Cuchulain!" one screamed in a thin, cracked voice.

"I may not stay for meat with anyone this day."

"Had a great lady bidden thee to a feast thou hadst lighted down from thy chariot fast enough," the woman grumbled, "but my sisters and I be beneath thy notice, yet it is not the custom of Cuchulain the Protector to despise the lowly."

At this his natural kindness of heart overcame him, and taking a gobbet of meat from the woman he ate it, whereat the crones screamed in wicked glee, saying:

"Thou hast broken thy name geise, Cuchulain, for this is a hound we roast," and from that hour the hero's strength seemed to depart from him. Nevertheless he drove on until he came to Slieve Fuad, where he awaited the host of Erc and Lewey on the banks of the Loch, and there they found him at the going down of the sun.

When he saw them coming, Cuchulain prepared to die a great death in the midst of his foes; but it was not Lewey's purpose that he should take his revenge thus, for he wished first to mock the hero in his loneliness; so he advanced with a handful of men, Erc, Ket, and Anluan.

"It is geise for thee to refuse the first request of a foe, Cuchulain," he said; "give thy spear to this satirist, therefore, I beseech thee," and he pointed to a man beside him.

"The request is granted," answered the hero, and as he spoke he hurled the spear so that the man for whom it was destined got his death of it, but instantly Lewey

snatched the weapon up and hurled it back. Swiftly the spear flew, and passing under Cuchulain's armpit, buried itself in the breast of the faithful Laeg.

"I have my death of that, master," cried the charioteer, and straightway fell down dying upon the cushions of the chariot. As he fell, Cuchulain snatched the reins from his hands, and now his battle fury came upon him for the last time. Straight into the heart of the host he drove, the sickle blades on his wheels working a fearful carnage. As he came the soldiers of Lewey fled from before his face to right and left, and turning, hurled their spears at him, until he bled from a dozen wounds. Then he drove to a great pillar stone, and with his last strength strapped himself to it, for he wished to die fighting and in his standing.

Still they continued to fling their javelins at him, but no man dared draw near to make an end. A spear that King Erc flung entered the side of the Grey of Macha, wounding him mortally, and then the horses broke free of the chariot and galloped away.

Now it is told that at the last, the Grey of Macha galloped back, the spear still hanging from his side, and laid his head upon his master's breast, while a halo of light shone about the hero's head, the thunder rolled and the lightning flashed. And still no man dared draw near.

At last Cuchulain's knees gave way, and he sank down, so that only his girdle strapped around the pillar-stone kept him from falling, and as he sank a black-hoodie crow, such as he had seen in the tree the day he had refused the love of the Morrigan, settled on his shoulder, pecking spitefully at his eyes.

Now Cuchulain hung within the strap gazing around him with death-dimmed eyes, and knew that the end was near. While he gazed, Lewey drew nigh and mocked him, but the host cried shame on such a dastard deed.

Darkness enfolded the land as Cuchulain thought on the years that had been, of the joyous days at Dûn

Skatha, of the great fight in the hall of the Lord of Lusca, and finally of the heroic deeds of his little band at the Battle of the Pass. With this thought his mood changed, for the memory of Ferdia obsessed his soul, and lo! Ferdia stood beside him, a shape of light!

"Welcome! my shield brother!" Cuchulain cried, but the shade answered never a word, whereat the hero turned to his thoughts again. And now Connla his only son stood on his left hand. Memories swarmed in his brain like homing pigeons, and as he thought of those he had loved and those he had slain—a great company—each one materialised before his vision—the dead, lit by the corpse light; the living, by their own aura.

Lewey would have made an end; but Cuchulain spoke in the voice as of one already dead:

"I have ever loved the Light, and as yet my Father hath not come to bid farewell as I stand here upon the marge of that great Unknown Sea called Death. Much havoc have I wrought in thy host, yet would I ask that the payment stand until the dawn."

"At dawn thou diest," answered Lewey, and laughed.

All through the night Cuchulain brooded over the past, and once he asked for water.

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At last came the dawn, black pointing fingers across the primrose sky.

The hero struggled to his feet as he drew in the cool fragrance of the morning air and heard the twittering of the little sleepy birds. Light was broadening fast as he watched the radiance growing on the hills. Step by step Lewey drew nearer, a naked blade in his hand. At last the golden rim of the sun burst above the mountains. Lewey stretched out his left hand and drew the death-dank locks aside from Cuchulain's neck.

"Oh, Father, who dwellest on high, I praise and adore thee, from the flaming portals of the dawn drive

out thy chariot to receive my spirit," murmured the hero.

The sword swept in the hush of the waiting host, and one by one the sounds of the marching army died away, and the land slept again around the glorious dead.

THE END.

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